

## Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

**Episode:** Just Transitions – a global exploration: the US

**Speakers:** Dr Jo Cutter, Hunter Moskowitz and Dr Mijin Cha

[00:00:00] **Jo:** Hi everyone, and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. My name is Jo Cutter, and I'm a lecturer in Work and Employment Relations here at Leeds University Business School. I'm just going to introduce my colleagues who are here from the US today - Hunter and Mijin.

[00:00:22] **Hunter:** Hi, my name is Hunter Moskowitz. I am a research specialist at the University of California, Santa Cruz and a PhD candidate at Northeastern University in World History.

[00:00:34] **Mijin:** Hi everyone. My name is Mijin Cha. I'm an assistant professor at the Environmental Studies Department at UC Santa Cruz. Happy to be here.

[00:00:42] **Jo:** Thanks Hunter and Mijin. I'm really looking forward to this episode. So, this is another episode of the series "Just Transitions - Global Exploration", where we're looking at some of the just transition work that has been happening across the globe as part of our international project, looking at the ways in which workers and trade unions are active in this space. Specifically in this episode, we're going to hear about the country case of the United States, that Mijin and Hunter have been working on.

And if you've not heard about the wider project that we are undertaking on the topic of just transitions around the globe, I suggest it would be useful for you to listen to episode one in this series. And we also have a range of other episodes that we're developing in relation to our country cases.

So far, we have South Africa, Poland, Germany, and Russia up, and we've got more to come. So, keep an eye on those spaces if you're interested to know more.

But coming back to the work of our colleagues in the United States. I'm really interested to hear before we leap into the detail of the work in this area, I'm going to ask you the question - [00:02:00] what do you understand by the term just transition? Who wants to make a start?

[00:02:04] **Hunter:** I think one of the things about just transition, at least from the perspective of the United States, is that there really isn't any just one definition when we're talking to labour leaders or even looking at government policy.

I mean, I think partly that stems from the fact that, the federal government has been pretty hands off when it comes to just transitions in general. And so there hasn't been a lot of thinking. So I think we've seen in our research everything of just transition being called like a "fancy funeral" right, by some labour leaders, basically seeing it as something that is actually attacking workers to something that, you know, has been embraced by a lot of unions as part of a green new deal and really seeing using that language to really justify widespread energy transitions and programs.

So, I think part of this is seeing how different sort of unions and groups put just transition on sort of a continuum between different types of policies. I think in looking at some of this, of what we've looked at, though there may be a couple categories of just transition that we see, there are just transition that's focused more on workers, and this idea of fossil fuel workers. There are so many workers in the United States, who are either directly working in fossil fuels, or their labour is connected to the fossil fuel industry. Like labour leaders have talked a lot about like railroads and things like that as an industry that transports a lot of coal across the United States.

And so even looking at a just transition that goes beyond just like the immediate workers. And then also thinking about the communities that are connected to, or based around fossil fuels, whether that's coal mining or whether that's a town or a city that has a lot of natural gas plants. And then I think there's some other approaches that have been more ignored by unions as much or maybe by the unions that are in the energy industry.

Like, we can think about [00:04:00] energy system as part of just transition, right? Thinking about how transitioning from, say, a society that is based around cars to one that's based around public transportation is a type of transition that has a lot of larger impacts or just thinking about equity in general, when it comes to just transition, thinking about racial justice as a, like at the forefront of just transition.

Who is being impacted by pollution? And then also mitigation efforts. Who are in mitigation efforts most focused around. So, I think those are some of the elements maybe of a just transition that some of what we've seen in the research with unions, but also some of that is maybe from other groups outside of the labour movement. And I think that's an important part to think about how large the web of just transition can be.

[00:04:49] **Mijin:** Yeah, and I would just add to that. You know, we could think, kind of, as just transition as the idea of how do we mitigate the negative social and economic consequences that will come from moving away from fossil fuels.

And so, to Hunter's point, I think that there is a very narrow vision of that, which is really what happens to workers in the fossil fuel industry and maybe it expands out to the communities that host this fossil fuel infrastructure. But I think what we're talking about is a larger move away from the idea of extraction to one of regeneration.

So, it's not just about, you know, if we have a renewable energy system that is built on exploited labour, that was not a just transition. So how can we think about this idea of justice within the energy transition? And that, I think, is kind of the broader picture that Hunter was painting about not just about work and workers, but how can we move to a more just system overall?

[00:05:39] **Jo:** Thanks for those reflections. Yeah, that really resonates. I'm looking at the case study in Spain where there's been this more expansive definition around kind of community and local economic regeneration, but within the very narrow space of coal and coal power generation. Anyway, we'll come to the comparisons between the cases a bit further down the line in this [00:06:00] project.

But for today, again, just really interested to hear a little bit more about the focus of your case study. Just really interested to hear about, in the first instance, who you've been working with, what the

scope of your investigation has been, and really your progress to date. What are the key themes coming through?

[00:06:16] **Hunter:** Yeah, so to get started, our case study sort of looks at a group called the Climate Jobs National Resource Center which is a non-profit group that has been helping to build coalitions of labour unions in states across the US. So these coalitions are basically groups of different unions, some of which are in the energy, transportation, construction industries, so types of unions that typically haven't been involved in this kind of just transition discussion, which have often kind of been hostile to this have now really taken the lead on sort of forming some of the climate policies, along with other unions such as teachers unions, unions in the service sector, public sector unions, right? So, these are large coalitions, some of which represent millions of members in total. And they're active in states. We've looked at Massachusetts, Texas, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York especially was sort of one of the first states to go through this sort of model of trying to create a coalition.

And what these coalitions have been doing is sort of trying to organize around climate issues and create a proactive agenda on climate. In the past, a lot of unions have sort of been responsive to environmentalist demand. So, environmentalists will, you know, think about how to, or look at pollution in certain projects or try to shape climate policy, and then unions have kind of reacted to that, putting their own demands up about how to transition different projects or to try to influence legislation. And so, this is more of an attempt to have a coherent, actual policy. And that's done through some organizing of the renewable [00:08:00] energy industry. Some, a lot, I would say, lobbying and putting public pressure on officials to pass legislation that will create jobs for workers who were formerly in fossil fuels. And also, through some education campaigns within the unions themselves to try to sort of spread both political education about climate change, but also to get workers prepared for what might be next possible opportunities in these spaces.

So, the most, I think the biggest focus has been in energy, especially renewable energy industries and putting in labour standards. In many states, there have been new legislation that's been created that basically says if you have a renewable energy project or an offshore wind project that is at least a couple megawatts of size, then you have to have an apprenticeship program on it. You have to pay union labor. You have to maybe have a community benefit agreement. There's a bunch of different, varieties of this, but the idea is to sort of have union coverage of the renewable energy industry. So, when workers move from fossil fuels to clean energy they have that coverage.

Because right now, if we look at the solar industry in the United States, it's being done basically completely non-union - lots of precarious work, pretty poor working conditions, very short-term contracts, people jumping from project to project, living on the road, essentially.

So, the idea is if we are going to make this transition, unions want to know how to do that in a way that is going to make it sustainable and possible.

And the other larger project has been focusing on schools. So, trying to get carbon-free schools. So that's sort of working across this divide between energy and construction unions and service unions and public sector union.

So, trying to get teachers unions on board with construction unions to sort of retrofit public schools, to build solar on schools, to get new clean energy vehicles for school buses. And see that scene as

sort of a way of leveraging sort of the public sector, [00:10:00] there's this idea of like leading with the public sector and then trying to incorporate the private sector.

So that's the second, larger campaign that's part of this. And yeah, I think one of the things we've taken away from this a lot is that there's been a lot of success when it comes to trying to promote job creation and sort of promote energy related projects. And then, when it comes to transportations or buildings, there's been less impetus for legislation, and it's been a harder approach there.

[00:10:30] **Mijin:** I think one of the interesting things about the Climate Jobs National Resource Center that we're pointing out is that it's actually an intra-labour coalition. So, it's a move away from a traditional blue green where you have environmentalists and labour working together, but it's just from especially at the start, only labour unions working with each other.

Which of course creates different dynamics and space for movement that we think is pretty interesting. And to build off of what Hunter just mentioned was that it's really aligning with green capitalism. So, you know, we see that there's this ascendance economic growth in renewable energy, but as Hunter pointed out, it's not perhaps maybe a larger project of decarbonization.

There's no call for instance for fossil fuel drawdown, or, you know, moving to public transportation or those kind of bigger... some of the coalitions have, you know, housing and affordable housing considerations, but it is kind of labour aligning with green capitalism versus a broader, perhaps social project of decarbonization.

[00:11:22] **Jo:** That's really fascinating. I mean, are there, you mentioned inevitably working across different union networks, there will be, you know, contestation. Are there those voices that are arguing for those maybe, you might answer, more expansive demands about rethinking alternative economic models or are those voices pretty absent from what you've seen so far?

[00:11:41] **Mijin:** I think the rethinking economic models is maybe not a step too far for many of our unions. I think maybe I would point to the Rhode Island coalition, which is more diverse than in terms of the interests that are represented. Very strong affordable housing demands and asks. So in some ways, I think that [00:12:00] the composition of the coalition reflects the demands and the policy priorities.

[00:12:05] **Hunter:** Yeah, and I also mentioned the example of Illinois, which is another state we've been looking at, which there's an interesting process of how they pass this sort of massive climate Bill, maybe really one of the first and so this was one of the first climate bills that really incorporated a lot of demands from labour.

And really incorporated the idea of just transition, I would say clearly in they had a displaced workers bill of rights. So, if you're a fossil fuel worker who's displaced by the energy transition, there are certain things you are entitled to from the government - huge, massive funding pots for all types of different projects.

And what was interesting about that example was that it was more of a negotiation between this intra-labour climate jobs coalition and another coalition, which was organized more by community groups, more by environmental justice groups, and I think what we saw there was that because that

there were sort of these two coalitions - which, frankly, the state legislature had kind of given up on negotiating and handed off to the coalitions to craft the bill themselves - was that there were some maybe more radical elements in that Bill because it was these each sort of coalition was sort of putting forward some of their own ideas. But I, I think part of this also has to do with sort of the paradigms of the coalitions, where I think, in general, the construction unions, the energy unions, they tend to be a little bit more conservative on decarbonization, right? Kind of wanting to maintain fossil fuels and green energy at the same time, while some of the public sector unions are much more willing to embrace that. And I think the interesting other interesting thing is that the coalitions, while they speak usually in one voice, there is sort of like a plurality of opinions, like in the New York coalition, right? There were some member unions who were big supporters of the Green New Deal had openly endorsed it and others that kind of weren't doing that. And so, when [00:14:00] it comes to actually drafting the legislation, there's a lot more compromise doing that. But I think unions can sort of act within and inside the coalitions and outside the coalitions at the same time.

Which, you know, I think in one way might limit the power of the coalition itself to push for those stronger changes, but when it comes to the floor kind of changes. It's a lot of base of support.

[00:14:23] **Jo:** Yeah, fascinating. These dynamics of coalitions are very interesting. And I just want to clarify that you're talking, that it sounds as though the majority of the dialogue and the action is really at state level legislatures. Is that correct? This, the kind of the aspect, which again, in contrast to the context of the UK case that we have we had a podcast on previously in the series tends to be much more focused at the workplace. I mean, that's clearly the dynamics of our own industrial relations systems means that that's the space within which with unions have more control.

I just wondered, in your examples, whether that, in a sense, whether that is a level of dialogue or if it's much more about sort of setting the conditions for kind of economic transition?

[00:15:09] **Mijin:** Yeah, I think it's much more the latter. Well, especially in our case study, we're talking about state level policy changes that are happening.

I think that, as Hunter mentioned, because the renewable energy sector is largely non-union those conversations at the workplace are not necessarily happening. And I think, because especially in the US, we, up until recently, had a total void of federal legislation that, you know, at least at the state level, you can try to set standards that would apply to more than one workplace and have some kind of floor for those labour standards.

But now that we have the Inflation Reduction Act, which I think we have mixed feelings about, but before then, really, it was like one of the reasons why the Climate Jobs National Resource Center arose was because there was just an absence of federal legislation. So, I think certainly we are more engaged on the state or federal level for these types of legislation than at the workplace level.

[00:15:59] **Jo:** And [00:16:00] presumably there's quite a lot of diversity then both obviously in the, you know, in the economic condition, the context, the economic context in those different states, but presumably also the kind of political leadership, the points of leverage. So there has to be quite a lot of dynamism between the strategy?

[00:16:15] **Mijin:** I mean, I think that was one of the impetuses, absolutely, for the establishment of the Climate Jobs National Resource Center, was that at some point, fossil fuel unions, and this is kind of aligned with the Tony Mazzocchi view of just transition, was that they need to be engaged in a

just transition discussion. And so, you know, I think part of why we see a reluctance to kind of call for decarbonization or fossil fuel drawdown is that, you know, these are really the unions or whose members jobs will be directly lost from these policies. So certainly, I think, and at the same time, they are among the most well compensated amongst the industry. So, I think it is definitely challenging to try to balance those different interests.

[00:16:54] **Jo:** And just as a, I suppose, a corollary to that, obviously there's been a critique in a number of places for, I mean, a kind of a feminist critique of saying that quite often the debate is about jobs that are predominantly done by men.

And the potential is for the new jobs in the new green economy to also be done by men. Is this aspect of both gender and possibly racial justice, another dimension that's within the debate or less so?

[00:17:20] **Mijin:** That's such an interesting point also, because you know, what we were talking about is when we think about low carbon jobs or green jobs, you know, care is actually a low carbon sector, and the care economy doesn't necessarily come up as a transition into sector.

So, we really see much more of the energy transition work. You know, that really dominates, but you're absolutely right that care predominantly women, predominantly women of colour in the United States is still, I think, not seen in at least mainstream labour discussions as a green sector.

And certainly, I think there is that that aspect of these jobs are still largely dominated by men that we are concerned about losing. [00:18:00] And if we don't expand our vision of low carbon sectors and the jobs that are being created will also be largely male dominated.

[00:18:06] **Jo:** Yeah. Fascinating. Again, just a small comparison in the Spanish context that this aspect of gender and also age has been one that has been infiltrated that the dialogue partly from the state from kind of government dialogue because of the focus on geographies as well as sectors those geographies are often very rural. If you think where coal mines and power stations are often located in areas that are already quite heavily depopulated.

So, this sort of dialogue around the sort of, in a sense, who's getting these jobs, as well as some of the policy priorities is a slightly different one. So, yeah, I'm going to be fascinated at the end of the project, how we bring these comparisons because some, there are lots of great similarities, but also differences in the way that labour movements in their national context, that kind of taking these debates forward.

What do you see in, in terms of sort of interesting outcomes - if you do at the moment, you know - are there examples where labour has been organized in sort of green fields, green field, green economy sites, so to speak, or interesting coalitions? I mean, the, obviously the public sector refit, debate is also one that's emerging in the UK.

That was the focus of the conversation in a previous episode with Sam Perry from the TUC in this region, where they're trying to develop this dialogue around the role of local authorities and retrofit in the dialogue with unions. So again, it would be great to share that. Do you have any interesting examples of progress or are there still sort of models that have, you know, proposals that are being put forward?

[00:19:45] **Hunter:** Yeah, I think the most interesting example is probably the offshore wind industry in the US. The offshore wind industry in the US is a fairly new industry, but basically, from the beginning labour has had a big role in shaping a lot of the [00:20:00] debates about offshore wind, how it's going to be implemented, and also using its political power to push for offshore wind. There has... we talked about how it has less been at the workplace in terms of organizing. I think the maybe exception to that is offshore wind, there are a number of offshore wind sites that have been organized through the typical union organization process.

And then in general, there just have been a lot of labour agreements between offshore wind companies and between labour unions. There have been some larger negotiations, especially because many of these are European companies, which are much, much used to having unionized labour forces, whereas many of the US-based renewable energy companies have been fairly antagonistic against labour. And so I think there has been seen that as a site of potential in terms of both sort of unions having a big role in the procurement of offshore wind, pushing for the expansion of offshore wind, getting more progress of more contracts between state governments and offshore wind companies, especially in New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, that kind of area and also maybe even pushing the federal government to offer more leases.

Now, the sort of unfortunate part of that is because of economic conditions, energy crisis, the increased costs of supply chains, many of the offshore wind companies have started pulling back on a lot of those projects. So, not all of them will probably be completed or there have to be significant revisions to how the projects are done to get them completed. But I think that offers at least a point of looking at how Labour can try to engage in these new fields of renewable energy and sort of adapt workers to technology.

There was a lot of energy too behind different training programs that were created to make that happen. And so I think that it's sort of a, might be a lesson in both the positive aspects of [00:22:00] thinking about labour's engagement with those new types of organizing, but also maybe a peril in the sense that, relying on a single industry or relying on something that is so dependent upon, sort of issues with the market, especially during economic crisis can be kind of perilous. And so trying to find mechanisms around that is a new direction that I think some unions are thinking about how to rely less on the companies and try to maybe look more at the state level and see looking at like New York in the building public renewables act, thinking about how the state can be the impetus for driving that instead of private developers who will just withdraw capital when it's no longer convenient or working for them.

[00:22:43] **Jo:** Sure, no, no, I think that's a really fascinating reflection in terms of this, you know, the pathways to transition as well as in the sense, the extent to which unions are not necessarily just responsive to private capital, but are also involved in those broader debates about the direction of the pathways of change.

Mijin, just as we close, is there any sort of final reflection you want to add in terms of thinking about how just transition, within the US, just transition and the labour movement, you know, where they're currently at and where you'd like to see them go?

[00:23:16] **Mijin:** Well, thank you, Jo, so much. This has been such an interesting conversation. I think that we, I think we are in a good place and ascending. You know, just, I was thinking about this just 10 years ago. Solar was really a nascent industry and unions were very firmly anti-climate

change. And there are, of course, still unions that are similarly against the transition away from fossil fuels.

But I think we are in a position where talking about climate change and talking about addressing climate change, and even this idea of just transition has more acceptance and people are more open to it, where I think we, what we need to do now is show proof of concept. So we have this argument that we can create a high quality, low carbon sector, and we're starting to see some of it with some job standards being put into place, but we really need [00:24:00] to show that we can actually advance a just transition in that we won't leave any workers or communities behind.

And so, I think what we're hoping to see with the Climate Jobs National Resource Center is exactly this, that, you know, when unions are involved, when unions are driving the conversation, we can see a much more equitable, much more just outcome. And so, I hope going forward that we can start to show this proof of concept, which means we can build from there into bigger and much more ambitious plans and more ambitious ideas.

[00:24:27] **Jo:** Great. Well, thank you both for taking us through the various strands of the work that you're doing and really look forward to seeing the results as we develop the project.

[00:24:38] **Hunter:** Thank you so much, this has been a great discussion.

[00:24:40] **Mijin:** Thanks, and we appreciate the opportunity.

[00:24:43] **Jo:** Thanks for listening. And as mentioned, the details of both our speakers and other parts of the series will be in the show notes. Thanks very much.

**ENDS**