

Leeds University Business School - Research and Innovation Podcast

Just Transitions – a global exploration: Quebec

Speakers: Dr Felix Schulz, Professor Melanie Laroche and Jonathan Michaud

[00:00:05] **Felix:** Hi, my name is Felix Schulz and you are listening to another episode of the “Just Transition - a global exploration series”, as part of the Research and Innovation podcast. Today I'm joined by Professor Melanie Laroche and Jonathan Michaud, lecturer and doctoral candidate from the University of Montreal. Hi Jonathan, hi Melanie.

[00:00:25] **Melanie:** Hello.

[00:00:26] **Jonathan:** Hi Felix.

[00:00:27] **Felix:** So our project, which is funded by the German Hans Böckler Foundation, explores the concepts of just transitions, its related policies, initiatives, and strategies across 13 countries around the globe. In today's episode, I'll be speaking to Melanie and Jonathan about their findings from the Quebec case study. As some of our listeners might know, usually in our podcast, we discuss country cases, but today we'll be slightly different because we'll have a focus on just transition in Quebec instead of Canada.

So my first question to the two of you - why are we looking at a particular region instead of a whole country? And what is so special about Quebec?

[00:01:11] **Melanie:** Thank you. So it's an excellent question, Felix, and to answer it, we need to look at the divisions of power with regard to labour in Canada. In fact, in Canada, responsibility for industrial relations is shared between the federal, the provincial, and territorial governments, which explains the coexistence of autonomous industrial relation in each province.

So in short - there is no unified Canadian industrial relations system. These different provincial systems are largely inspired by the American Wagner Act of 1935. And, we adopt here also, many of the principles of the American system. [00:02:00] For example, rank and file union recognition, monopoly of representation, and establishment level bargaining.

So, despite the similarity between these systems, distinction can be made between them. So in Quebec, industrial relations system is often presented as an exception in North America. Liberals are considered to be more progressive, and the welfare state is more prisoned, having been shaped in a very different political environment. The Quebec system is a hybrid model, inspired by the American system, for sure, but also influenced by the European model. So many decisions in Quebec are the result of social dialogue between social partners at regional sector role, but also at provincial level.

It is also mentioning that in Quebec, unlike in Canada and the United States, we observe a context of union pluralisms that brings an entirely different dynamics to the industrial relations system. And because of these particularities, these are rather distinct characters of the Quebec system. We definitely have to study it independently.

[00:03:16] **Felix:** Perfect. Thank you very much. And when we look at the project, how important is the topic of climate change for labour unions in Quebec? Because you have studied the case; what did you find out?

[00:03:31] **Jonathan:** Yeah, so the topic of climate change for labour unions - labour unions had a long history of fighting for environmental rights, but the climate issues have come forward in 2015 after the Paris Agreement where unions in Quebec renewed their actions on climate change. The main union on climate change has been the FDQ, [00:04:00] which is the largest Quebec union, and it's been participating in clubs around that time and has encouraged all their federations to add a position on the issues since then.

There's also a coalition of unions for which, in which all the Quebec unions are members – the [4 min 24] Inter-union Climate Network or Réseau intersyndical pour le climat, which was formed in 2021. And as exchanges on the unions around our best strategies, best practices and to share knowledge. So the majority of trade unions at the moment have adopted resolutions on the importance of integrating the climate crisis into their agenda and want to demand the conditions to ensure a just transition.

Also for the time being, union leaders are aware of the importance of the issues, are mobilizing resources to educate and mobilize member and are taking part in national and regional public discussions through social dialogue and participating in coalitions. Also with environmental and trade unions group, such as the [5 min 20] CRE [Comités régionaux de l'environnement], which are regional committees on environment.

One of the issue that is coming for the unions is the difficulty to adapting the climate issues on the local unions. So local unions try to take action on these issues. One of the main problems for unions is the fact that most of the regions in Quebec are single industry regions in which, losing jobs is the main factor that workers [00:06:00] fear.

[00:06:01] **Felix:** So there's a lot going on in Quebec, I can, I can see, and there's a lot of involvement as well, as you highlighted, with other groups. You already touched upon some of the contentious points you said now. So, what are the main contentious aspects here? And where do you see our unions potentially disagreeing with one another?

[00:06:24] **Melanie:** I don't think we have a lot of kind of tension among unions in Quebec, in fact. Because of the inter union coalition, in fact. They are spoken all together to take some kind of positions, that will drive the union's movement in Quebec. We can observe maybe some tensions between sectors in Quebec. For example, the public sector's unions are challenging the government to be more proactive on the reduction of gas emissions.

But, in the manufacturing sectors, unions are more, maybe, reactive and maybe more protective of the job loses that they will have or they're facing. So, we have that kind of tensions, but it's not among union organization as a whole. It's maybe between some representative from sectors to another, and they have to use dialogue for the moment.

They are trying to put all the people in the unions, trying to have a dialogue to resolve some kind, this kind of tensions

[00:07:42] **Felix:** And just for me, because I don't know Quebec so well, what is kind of the setup? So you talked about industries and manufacturing, just what are like the main industries for instance?

[00:07:54] **Melanie:** We have all kinds of industry in Quebec. We have a lot of forestry, for example, mining, [00:08:00] manufacturing. We have a lot of servicing, traditional servicing, public sectors, services. So we have a lot of economic activity in Quebec.

[00:08:11] **Jonathan:** What we don't have that is different from the rest of Canada is that there is no petrol industry. The petrol industry is mainly refineries. So that, that is a main difference. And one of the issues between the unions is, what is gonna be the energetic, future of Quebec. Because we have a lot of hydroelectricity. But we also have natural gas, an industry that is quite big in Quebec.

[00:08:48] **Felix:** Okay. Thank you. And our project is all about the just transition. And in some other podcasts, we have come across the term being used a lot, or being used less in different conceptualizations. When you look at Quebec, do unionists ever use the term just transition? And if so, what does it mean to them?

[00:09:10] **Jonathan:** Yeah, Unions started using the term after the ILOs - International Labour Organisation - put it in their program. So they're using the definition that the ILO has. But some of the unions in Quebec also have members in the rest of Canada, which has fossil fuel extraction. And because of the mostly conservatory governments, the term has been toxified, so for members outside of Canada, it's not really their cup of tea to use the term "just transition". But Quebec unions do use it when they're in Quebec with Quebec members, and it's a term that speaks to them, and [00:10:00] for unions that did not use the term just transition prior, they were using sustainable development and other terms in that range, they're moving towards just transition. So it's coming quite big inside of Quebec.

[00:10:16] **Felix:** Okay. And when you talk to them, what does it mean to them, this term "just transition"?

[00:10:23] **Jonathan:** Yeah, they're really using the ILO definition, which is to move the economies from fossil fuel, and extraction for fossil fuel use to a greener economy with workers and for everyone, so that's mainly what they're talking about - having the great working conditions that they had prior to the transition, but with a green transition in a green economy.

[00:10:52] **Felix:** And from your research you have, you've done so far and conducted so far, what are like the most important findings that stand out to you, or even things that have surprised you when you talk to unionists or analyze documents?

[00:11:07] **Melanie:** The main findings - so we have a lot from now, because we've done a lot of field work, essentially with local unions, in fact. So we observed in Quebec, unions are using both proactive and reactive strategies. So the hybrid natures of Quebec industrialization system allows unions to act at different level. And to spend on a variety of issues affecting workers, and they are acting on climate crisis and just transition. So, they developed a lot of mechanisms and they put forward strategies to deal with the climate crisis. For example, they are doing a lot of representation in international bodies.

They are doing also provincial and regional political representation, lobbying. [00:12:00] They are using a lot, coalitions with community, but also with environmental groups. So they are speaking together, and it's quite unusual because usually environmental groups don't speak necessarily to unions because they are not the same goals and they're using collective bargaining at the local level also to respond to the climate crisis and to adapt to the effects of climate crisis on workers.

We observe essentially two different logic driving union strategy at different levels of action. First of all, we observed that institution of national and sectoral dialogue enabled the coordination of mitigation, but also adaptation to climate crisis. So trade unions develop knowledge and networks to influence laws and standards in Quebec, but they also use national and international actions to help Quebec's, and influence the economic development in Quebec.

So we have a lot of sectoral committee who are dedicated to the environment also. So we have those committee who are working in collaboration with experts from academia, governments, representative on the environment and renewable energy sectors. So they are trying to explore what are the effects of the green transition on the labour market in Quebec, and they've done a report that concludes that the green transition in Quebec is not expected to result in major job losses in Quebec.

So this is very important to understand that, because [00:14:00] what is expected, it's a need for Quebec's workers to upgrade the skills of the workforce, but we're not facing a lot of job losses in Quebec. So this is important and maybe this is why unions are not really afraid about the just transition and the climate crisis because they know they will have development in a new economy.

So, we have those institutions at the sectoral level, so it is important to understand that the industrial relations system in Quebec allows unions for multi-level dialogue on the issue of climate crisis, and they are developing right now a lot of, they are doing a lot of work actually to face the climate crisis at the sectoral level.

But they are also acting at the local level, and this is a real challenge for union right now, because we can observe that in unions in Quebec, we have few experts in each union who are really acting on climate crises. They are able to fuel the reflection inside the union, but they can't act in every local unit. So this is a challenge for unions right now at the local level, because they will have to develop some union training programmes to equip and to educate members on the climate crisis in a way that they are able to really act at the local level. And for the moment, what we observed at this level, it's a kind of actions who are put in place to answer to the effect of [00:16:00] crisis of climate crisis.

So they are using existing clauses and collective agreement to respond to the effect of the climate crisis. So, for example, we have a lot of health and safety committees at the local level, and unions are using it to face or to adapt to thermal stress, for example. Or they're using technological change clauses in a way to be sure in fact that workers will receive some professional training and upgrading the skills of the workforce.

So there's a lot of work, who is doing right now, but we can see two different logics. At the local level they are in the adaptation. And at the sectoral or provincial level, they are more acting for mitigation in face of climate crisis.

[00:16:57] **Felix:** I can really see a lot of the European model you were talking about it for all the things that you are discussing and so many similarities to Germany as well with the lobbying, with

the coalition building, but also using collective bargaining agreements that exist in order to feed something. And so I think it's interesting to see that similar systems where in unions are institutionalized in, developing similar strategies.

And as a last question today in the podcast episode, when you look at your findings, I've briefly touched upon it now already, how do you think your findings fit in or relate to the global discourse? We have had other podcast episodes before, other countries - how do you think it fits into it?

[00:17:45] **Jonathan:** Yeah, as you said, it fits into the global European or Western discourse on climate change and just transition. So it's very much anchored in globalization, technological [00:18:00] improvements for Quebec unions. That's what they're looking for. They're seeing climate change as an opportunity for growth, if we're looking in the construction industry, for example, you go to Montreal, there's a lot of orange cones.

We're adapting to climate change, and this is a way to have more opportunities on the economical part, economics part. But what is different from the global discourse is the fact that we don't contest capitalism that much as Global South unions would do and neither for colonialism, which is an issue from the Global South that these kind of discourse don't really take place in Quebec unions.

Nevertheless, we still have, international coalitions, with Global South unions. So I think this kind of discourse is also growing in Quebec unions, for instance, we have the degrowth ideas that are coming into unions. It's very new. We heard about it last week, so it might not be that mature, but these kind of discourses are shaking a little bit on the just transition and maybe trying to make bridges between the Global South and the Global North in which we are.

[00:19:37] **Melanie:** But we also have our challenge here in Quebec. At the moment, at the local level, in each factory, the union representative does not necessarily have enough knowledge to challenge the employers on the project or on the technological change that is needed to face the climate crisis.

So unions [00:20:00] are not challenging capitalisms, but they are not challenging the employer either. Local unions will often be active when the project is on the table when employer have decided to invest and maybe what is important to say - Quebec is not the first place that in international groups wants to invest because we've already used hydroelectricity and we're not the last student in the group.

So what we have seen is that the unions don't necessarily have the tools to put pressures on the international groups to invest in Quebec.

And the second challenge for the union is that they need to have internal knowledge about climate crisis in order to be able to challenge the employer in each workplace.

And what we have seen in some of the plants that we have visited with Jonathan is that workers are essential when employers decide to invest because they are the people who know the production process the best. So the workers are involved in the project, but not at the moment when we decide what we are going to change in the plant, what kind of project we are going to put in place, and what kind of investment we are going to make in that plant.

That's a matter for engineering department and top management, but not a labor relation or a social dialogue issue. But basically what the unions in Quebec have to do at the moment is to develop more training for all the unions that are representative in each unit, because, unfortunately, they do not have an expert on the issue of the climate crisis in each plant.

[00:21:50] **Felix:** Is that an issue of, in general, union power; that there's not enough money to have enough experts?

[00:21:57] **Melanie:** I don't think it's a question of resources. I [00:22:00] think it is a question of the configuration of our industrial relations system. We are a very small province and we have about 8,000 bargaining units. So you have to train all the union representative in each bargaining unit. So it's quite difficult to do so, and at the moment, the climate crisis is still not an industrial relation issue, I can say.

I mean, the representatives have to negotiate a lot of issues like wages, work hours, retirement plan, et cetera, so action on climate crisis is not an issue that reach the majority of people.

[00:22:39] **Felix:** Okay. So it's not the top priority.

[00:22:42] **Melanie:** It's not a top priority at the moment, and they already know that they have to educate a little bit more members. This is what is happening at the moment. They are trying to mobilize members on this issue, trying to make them understand that there is no job on the dead planet. That is the message that we are hearing in a lot of unions in Quebec right now.

So, we are at the beginning of something in Quebec. There is a lot of work that has to be done. That's already been done, but the main challenge is to bring all the member in each local unit to become real climate actors.

[00:23:21] **Jonathan:** I would also add there's another issue on the legitimacy of unions. Because some unions do have experts that got their knowledge either from their federation or by themselves on the issues and when they're presenting their results and presenting propositions to employers, employers don't recognize the legitimacy of unions to act on these issues.

So they're also, they have to work on that or I mean, employers have to work on recognizing that workers and unions can be a central actor in making workplaces more adapted to climate change or working on mitigating climate change.

[00:24:06] **Felix:** Okay. So like you said, there is no direct involvement of unions or worker representatives in decisions, right? On investments around climate change, correct?

[00:24:16] **Jonathan:** Exactly, yeah.

[00:24:18] **Felix:** And there is no institutional mechanism that would bring unions or worker representatives in that position.

[00:24:26] **Jonathan:** Not at the moment. They're trying through committees on local level, but most of these committees are not working on strategical decisions and investments. They're coming

[00:26:00] after the decision has been made to make sure to act as watchdogs on these issues, to make sure that it does not affect that much the workers.

What will be the next, the new technology that will change everything? Workers are not there at the table, even though they would like to.

[00:24:56] **Melanie:** And they do not necessarily have enough knowledge to challenge the data and the project of the employers. They agree to set up an environmental committee to discuss environmental issue with the employers and sometimes the employers present some data to the unions, but the unions do not have the knowledge to challenge this data.

So they don't necessarily act in the way that they should do at the moment. In some cases, therefore, they have certain institutional mechanisms to take actions, but they are not sufficiently equipped to really act on this issue of emission mitigation, for example.

[00:25:41] **Felix:** Thank you. Melanie, Jonathan, this sounds like a very interesting case and something exciting to follow over the next couple of years to see how unions get on, whether they can train their members, whether they can form more coalitions and get more involved for the time being. I thank you both for your expertise, for giving us some insights into the Quebec case and for telling me a bit more about why Quebec is different from Canada. And so thank you both very much.

If you want to find out more about the case and about the project as a whole, there are webpage details in the episode show notes. Take care. Bye bye.

- **Ends** -