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A Just Transition Must Include Climate Change Adaptation

Some effects of climate change—such as extreme weather, including droughts or flooding—are unavoidable, even if greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are reduced. Adapting to these effects, rather than suffering them, is a necessity. Trade unions should be more aware of climate change adaptation, and should include it when they bargain with employers or the state.



Photo credit: Syndicat Unia

In 2016 UNIA—the largest trade union active in construction and industrial work in Switzerland—won special protection for workers of the Vaud region in the case of severe weather. Now, during the winter months, the mechanism negotiated by the union with the employers' association and the regional State (Canton) ensures that work on outside construction sites is stopped in the case of heavy rain, snow or cold weather.

As part of the agreement, the Swiss Federal Office of Meteorology publishes an official weather forecast for the region twice a day, which serves as the basis for deciding whether work should be stopped or not. If that is the case, workers receive financial compensation for lost hours of work thanks to a tripartite fund (paid for by the state, employers and workers).

During the summer, the weather forecast also flags exceptionally warm days (above 34°C), but this situation does not yet lead to protection and compensation for workers. And nor does it cover workers in other trades. However, UNIA wishes to include heat waves in a further round of negotiations with employers. Such a development will be needed to protect workers' health when Switzerland experiences much warmer summer months in the near future because of climate change.



Photo credit: Manu Friederich via Unia

According to newspaper reports on a recent study, Geneva is one of the cities that will experience over 2°C summer temperature increase in just ten years' time—and by 2060 there is likely to be a tripling of the number of days where the temperature rises over 30°C. Under these circumstances the protection of the health and security of construction workers is a pressing issue. The severe weather compensation mechanism shows what trade unions could and should seek to achieve.

So far trade unions at the local, national or even international level have generally focused their efforts on the 'mitigation' part of climate policies—those that entail reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Overall, this drive is already yielding effects by encouraging coalitions of trade unions and environmental NGOs to demand labour-friendly measures in energy transitions, public ownership, reclaiming energy production and so on.

But adapting our cities, rural areas and our economy to a warmer climate is a whole different challenge. Not only do greenhouse gas emissions need be reduced, but we also need to learn to live with a changed climate and to cope with its effects such as more extreme weather events. In rural areas this may lead to longer periods of drought. In mountain areas it may mean less snow and, hence, maybe less tourism—or at least the need to change the unsustainable patterns of winter tourism that rely exclusively on capital intensive and ecologically damaging activities (such as artificial snow production). In cities it may mean more frequent and longer periods of heat waves affecting vulnerable people such as isolated elderly people.



Retreating Morteratsch Glacier, photo credit: Andreas Handschin via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Climate change mitigation is a trade union matter because it threatens employment in “brown” sectors and offers an opportunity to expand it into “green” sectors, such as renewable energy. This is the main concern addressed by the Just Transition framework. But trade unions should worry about climate change adaptation too. Climate change adaptation—whenever possible—will only succeed if it does not reinforce existing inequalities. Unions must ensure that capital, not working people, pays the price of climate change; and unions should be a key actor in the discussion of transition plans. Indeed, where trade unions are weak and worker protection inadequate, climate change adaptation may come to mean longer working hours, less stable and harsher working conditions (as documented by Ethemcan Turhan and his colleagues in the case of migrant labour in Turkish agriculture).

Negotiating financial compensations, as UNIA did, is just one of the dimensions of adapting workplaces to the effects of climate change. Public service unions representing fire brigades or health workers are at the forefront of managing the impacts of climate change, such as droughts, flooding or heat waves. They should make an argument about protecting local public services as a buffer against the effects of climate change—and indeed they can argue for more public spending on infrastructures (such as electricity generation, public transport, research and education, health etc.) as a strategy for building resilience collectively.

Unions can be proactive if they anticipate the possible effects of climate change—and some of them are already aware of this challenge. But first, they must realize, that climate change adaptation is a union concern. Trade unions should anticipate these transformations to better shape the contemporary and future decisions on climate change adaptation and resilience. It also matters if we want trade unions to be more deeply involved in the community. What are you doing about it in your union?

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