

Adaptation Strategies: Labour Education, Climate Crisis and the UK Trade Union Movement

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of climate activists and scholars argue that an effective climate movement needs the involvement of the trade union movement, to be able to push forward the radical social transformations required to address the global climate crisis. This article analyses the recent focus on climate adaptation in labour education and action by trade unions in the UK. Climate adaptation is inherently political, and this article analyses the agendas driving the turn to adaptation, the possibilities that adaptation strategies open up, and some of their risks and limitations. Climate adaptation strategies, the article argues, could represent an important step forward for developing effective labour education and action on the climate crisis, but only if these strategies enable unions to mobilize a focus on the root causes of the crisis, agitate for structural change, and attend to the global and not just local concerns of worker, social and climate justice.

KEYWORDS

Climate adaptation; climate crisis; just transition; labour education; trade unions.

Introduction

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in the United Kingdom posted on its website in 2021 a series of videos on the “climate emergency”, with the tagline, “firefighters are the first line of defence against climate change”. In one video, a firefighter talks of the challenges of fighting growing numbers of wildfires on the UK’s moorlands. In another, a firefighter speaks of running search and rescue operations in the context of increasing frequency and severity of flooding in the country. In a third video, a firefighter warns of not being able to get to local emergencies due to washed out roads or crews being called away to help with climate change induced events elsewhere (FBU, 2021). The videos represent a union that has taken a strong stand on climate issues, calling for the rapid phase out of fossil fuels, and public ownership and democratic control of the energy sector (Hooks, 2017; La Torre, 2019). But they are also indicative of a shift that has taken place across the UK trade union movement, to focus labour education and action not just on climate change mitigation, but also on the problem of adaptation to the local effects of a worsening climate.

In the early 2000s, many UK trade unions embraced a state-supported “workplace greening agenda”, in which unionists learned to work with employers to “reduce the environmental impact of the workplace” (BIS, 2010: 1; Farnhill, 2018). This was concerned with what is known generally as climate change mitigation: to find ways to reduce (or recapture) greenhouse gas emissions that lead to climate change, with the aim of tackling the root causes of climate change (Kongsager, 2018). In the 2020s, although workplace greening is still on the agenda, a growing concern for unions has been the opposite question of responding to how workplaces are being impacted by a

changing environment. This is the focus on climate change adaptation, or making adjustments that are “aimed at preparing for or dealing with the consequences of climate change” (Kongsager, 2018: 163), with a concern to limit harm and “reduce the biophysical, social and economic vulnerability (or enhance resilience) of a given area, organisation, population group or individuals” to a changing climate (Dolsak and Prakash, 2018: 319). Climate change mitigation and adaptation have been referred to as the two pillars of climate action – although, as will be discussed below, the relationship between the two has often been a point of contention in climate politics (Dolsak and Prakash, 2018).

This shifting concern on the part of UK trade unions has been driven, in part, by changes in the UK climate, as the country has witnessed unprecedented heatwaves and wildfires, and intensified storm action, flooding and coastal erosion. In July 2022, “UK temperatures surpassed 40C for the first time on record, ... the UK Met Office released its first ever red weather warning for heat, while the UK Health Security Agency issued its first level 4 heat-health alert” (Tandon, 2022). The country’s “fire weather index – a numerical indicator of the likelihood of extreme fire behaviour ... reached a record level” in summer 2022, as firefighters in England “dealt with nearly 25 000 wildfires” (Jones, 2023; Stafford, 2022). In the fifteen years between 2007 and 2022, UK cities and towns were hit by fifty flash floods; predictions suggest that damage caused by flooding “in some parts of the UK will rise by 25 per cent [over the next fifty years] even in the best-case climate scenario” (Laville, 2022; Murugesu, 2023). Rates of coastal erosion are accelerating, “compounded by sea-level rise and other effects of climate change, such as more extreme storms and prolonged wet weather” (Day and Nicholls, 2022). Extreme weather is becoming the “new normal”, and is likely to have severe, unequal and costly impacts throughout the country (Krebs and Brown, 2022). While the challenge of climate change adaptation was previously often seen to be primarily a concern for populations living in the Global South, where the harshest impacts of a changing climate have long been felt, countries in the Global North are now also having to learn how to adapt effectively to accelerating climate change (Kongsager, 2018).

However, the shift toward climate adaptation education and action should not be seen simply as a reflex by UK unions to a changing climate. Rather, it is also a strategic and political intervention that seeks to address a core set of challenges that unions face in developing effective labour education and action on the climate crisis, which arise from problems in worker interest, union capacity and workplace collective action. This article analyses the key drivers of the UK trade union shift to focus their education and action on climate adaptation, the successes and possibilities that union adaptation strategies open up, and some of their risks and limitations. Two of the most important developments that are opened up by trade union climate adaptation strategies are to put at the heart of climate action a concern with worker and class justice, and to construct a broad-based, cross-sector coalition of workers who are directly concerned with and acting on the climate crisis. While the focus of this article is on the UK, the issues discussed here have relevance for union movements elsewhere grappling with how best to address the global climate crisis, for climate activists hoping to engage trade unions in a broader climate movement, and for activists, practitioners and researchers alike who need to understand the political nature and significance of climate adaptation practice, as a changing climate brings concern with adaptation to the foreground. Trade union climate adaptation strategies, the article argues, can represent an important move forward for developing effective labour education and action on the climate crisis – but only if these strategies enable unions, their members and core activists to mobilise a focus on the root causes and not just the effects of the crisis, to demand structural and not just incremental change, and to attend to the global and not just local concerns of worker, social and climate justice.

The Politics of Climate Adaptation Education and Action

Adaptation can have a negative connotation in both critical education and climate movement circles (Pelling, 2011). Paulo Freire (1998: 27), in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, condemns the “immobilising ideology of fatalism, ... which insists that we can do nothing to change the march of social-historical and cultural reality because that is how the world is anyway”. “From the standpoint of such an ideology,” writes Freire, “only one road is open as far as educative practice is concerned: adapt the student to what is inevitable, to what cannot be changed”. In opposition to “banking education” that teaches students to “adapt to the world as it is,” Freire (1970: 54, 73) calls for a “liberating education” that instead teaches students how to “unveil” root causes of problems in society and “commit themselves to its transformation”. What Freire refers to as liberating education is often talked about, in relation to the climate crisis, as a radical, transformative or transgressive model of climate change education (Iyengar and Kwauk, 2021; Tannock, 2021). In the context of climate politics, adaptation has been described by Dolsak and Prakash (2018: 329) as “a neglected if not a taboo topic”, due to a “belief that talking about adaptation is a form of capitulation on mitigation”, and represents either “a failure of mitigation or ... a way to weaken mitigation efforts” (Kongsager, 2018: 160; Moser, 2012: 172). Mann (2021: 173), among others, warns that a focus on adaptation to climate change is becoming a favoured tactic of climate “inactivists” and “false solutionists”, who seek to defend the “business-as-usual burning of fossil fuels”. In this framing, writes Mann, “talk of reducing carbon emissions, blocking new fossil fuel infrastructure, and embracing renewable energy remain off limits”, while instead we should just work on how to “adapt to the ‘new normal’” (Mann, 2021: 177). Adaptation may be embraced as a strategy of “depoliticisation ... in which hegemonic practices [that cause climate change] are allowed not only to continue but also to escalate” (Nyberg et al., 2023: 111). The concern is the risk that focusing on adapting to the impacts of a changing climate may lead to the passive acceptance of climate change itself as a *fait accompli*.

Few would deny, though, that some degree of climate change is inevitable and there is a need to learn how to live with a changing climate. Indeed, concerns with addressing the “inequitable impacts of climate change” are at the heart of calls for climate justice and a just transition (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014: 368). As Sultana (2022: 118) writes, “climate justice fundamentally is about paying attention to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways”. Many workers are particularly vulnerable to climate change harms and may “serve the function of ‘canaries in the coal mine’ of climate change impacts”, since “unlike those who may be at greater liberty to respond, adapt [to], and escape the impacts of climate change, workers’ exposure and their response is controlled by the requirements of their jobs and employers” (Roelofs and Wegman, 2014: 1799, 1780). Developing effective labour education and action on climate adaptation is thus an essential component of working toward a just transition for workers and foregrounding a concern with the class and global dimensions of climate justice. Focusing on the local impacts of climate change is also recognised as a key component of effective models of climate change education, centred on issues personally meaningful and relevant to learners (Tannock, 2021). Creating spaces to reflect on the local harms of climate change, write Carrico et al. (2015: 20), “may make climate change impacts more salient and thus increase concern about climate change and support for preventive measures”. A turn to climate adaptation can, in other words, be about embracing good and effective pedagogical practice in climate change education (Monroe et al., 2019).

What these contrasting views of climate adaptation education and action highlight is that

adaptation is never simply a technical matter as it is often presented, but is inherently political (Nyberg et al., 2023). “Adaptation is a social and political act”, writes Pelling (2011: 3), that is “intimately linked to contemporary, and with the possibility for re-shaping future, power relations in society”, and as such, “different actors perceive contrasting roles for adaptation”. Climate adaptation education and action, done by unions or employers, schools or universities, the state or other groups, is contested terrain, shaped by agendas relating to climate and society and economy more generally. To evaluate the significance of different adaptation strategies, we need to ask who is proposing these strategies, for which agendas. Pelling (2011) notes that adaptation strategies may be put forward to preserve the fossil fuel status quo, make incremental changes, or support a project of radical social transformation. In radical and transformative conceptualisations of climate adaptation, the often-presumed dichotomy between mitigation and adaptation is removed, as mitigation and adaptation become complementary approaches that attend to challenging the root causes of climate change, as well as limiting harms, particularly for the most vulnerable (Kongsager, 2018). Nyberg et al. (2023: 111) argue that adaptation strategies differ in terms of whether they are promoted by and for business elites or marginalised communities living “at the forefront of climate impacts”; and whether these strategies promote a “localised and fragmented” social politics “in which the connections between the traces of ecological catastrophe are broken”, or mobilise a global vision of climate justice, that links concern with local climate change impacts to demands for structural responses to the root causes of climate crisis and support for marginalised groups elsewhere that suffer the greatest harms from climate change (Nyberg et al., 2023: 111).

Research Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative research study¹ investigating the kinds of effective and transformative climate change education that are being developed and put into practice by trade unions and other worker organisations in the UK. The key research questions of the study were: What strategies and models of worker climate change education are being adopted? What are the principal successes and challenges of this work? How are worker interests being linked to the climate crisis? How is a shared vision of what a just transition should look like being developed?

Between October 2022 and January 2024, I conducted interviews with fifty-five union staff, labour educators, union activists and others engaged in worker education on the climate crisis. This included speaking with “leads” of education and environment at six of the ten largest unions in the UK, as well as the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which are both umbrella organisations of unions, but also with labour educators running workshops on climate and environment issues, and rank and file union activists engaged in climate activism. I identified participants through trade union websites, media and social media reporting on labour climate organising, and snowball sampling. I spoke with individuals across England, and in Wales and Scotland. Here, the familiarity after Covid of most trade unionists with speaking over Zoom made a national study relatively easy; indeed, many unionists in London, where I am based, also chose to speak over Zoom for reasons of convenience.

Quotations in this article are drawn from these interviews, unless otherwise specified. In addition to conducting interviews, I also collected curriculum materials and documents about workers, trade unions and the climate crisis that were produced by unions and other groups; and I

¹ Research ethics: Ethics approval for this research was given by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee (REC 1692). All subjects provided appropriate informed consent. No outside funding was received for this research. There are no competing interests to declare.

observed labour and climate focused conferences, workshops and demonstrations. The individuals I spoke with were engaged in all sectors of the UK economy, including transport, health, education, culture, government, communications, retail, hospitality, manufacturing and energy. In addition to primary research, I collected and reviewed previous research on labour and the climate crisis in the UK and globally. While this article focuses on climate adaptation education and action by UK trade unions, the analysis is informed by this broader set of data.

Adaptation Strategies in Labour Education on the Climate Crisis

Climate activists in the UK union movement face several challenges in developing effective labour education and action on the climate crisis. One is a problem of sustaining interest among members. “In public consciousness, climate was at the forefront for a while”, says a teacher trade unionist, “but in the last couple of years, there’s been other things that were more pressing” because we have “multiple crises, ... the Covid crisis, cost of living crisis”. For some union organisers, there remains a sense that climate is not really a core union concern. “Unions are never going to be seen as the main proponents of climate [action]”, says an educator with the TUC, “because it’s not always our number one priority: sometimes it’s pay rise, sometimes it’s the terms and conditions”. “It’s a constant struggle”, agrees an organiser with the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, “to make sure [climate] is seen as a critical bargaining and negotiating issue”. “We are trying very hard to push it”, says the organiser, but “it drops off [the agenda] as we talk about pay and we talk about pensions”. There is “a feeling in some parts of the labour movement”, says a unionist working in the London Underground, that climate is “an issue for middle class students and hippies”, not the organised working class.

A further challenge is the limited ability of unions to take direct action on climate. Some in the climate movement argue for the potential power of organised labour to push for radical social change to address the climate crisis (such as Aronoff et al., 2019; Huber, 2022; Saltmarsh, 2021). But in the UK union movement, activists point out that the law forbids them from taking direct strike action on climate change. “For decades workers in the UK have been fenced in by multiple laws which make quick and effective strike action difficult, and action over political issues like climate change more difficult still”, notes a statement, signed by one hundred trade unionists and politicians in the UK, that calls for “the abolition of all anti-union laws, and their replacement with strong legal rights for workers and unions – including rights to strike freely at will, in solidarity with others and for political demands” (Earth Strike, 2021). Union activists point out as well that while union learning reps and health and safety reps have statutory recognition in the UK, and thus can access facility time to work on learning and health and safety concerns, no such statutory recognition or facility time is available for the environment or green reps some unions have created.

Even if a union mobilises member interests on the climate and navigates legal and institutional restrictions on addressing climate matters in the workplace, it is often unclear what kinds of collective action unionists might take that would be effective in addressing the climate crisis. “Unions tend to struggle with where to position climate action and what the demands and asks are of the employers”, says a labour educator with the GFTU. An earlier wave of greening workplace initiatives among UK unions during the New Labour government tended to be localised in individual workplaces, apolitical and technical, dependent on state and employer support for success, and not always tied to immediate worker interests (Farnhill, 2018; Zbyszewska, 2021). Larger scale climate actions, such as demanding public ownership of energy or calling for an end to new fossil fuel development, are often seen as policy matters to be handled by union leaders and head offices. We can train up green reps, a TUC labour educator says, but “what do you want [the

reps] to do?”

The turn to climate adaptation as a focus of labour education and action has been embraced by some union staff and activists as a way of addressing these issues. Focusing on protecting workers, their families and communities from the local impacts of a changing climate is a way of making climate change a tangible, personal concern, directly tied to worker interests and trade union priorities. When the FBU started to raise concern about the increasing frequency of severe flooding in the UK, says one labour educator, “it was an immediately industrial issue, because firefighters were going out to these incidents in the wrong kit, without the right equipment, and their health and safety was in jeopardy”. Likewise, the summer 2022 heatwave “drove it home for all of our members” that “this is climate change” and “it’s affecting us at work”, says a union rep at the British Museum; “That’s really changed the mindset of a lot of our colleagues.” Union adaptation strategies also work to reframe climate change from being (not just) an environmental issue to being a learning issue (what education and training do workers need to adapt effectively to climate change impacts?) and a health and safety issue, and open the possibility for unions, legally and institutionally, to act directly on climate change issues.

Health and safety concerns, of course, have long been a central frame for unions to engage with environmental issues, and were at the heart of the development of the concept of a just transition for workers by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union in the United States in the 1970s (Räthzel et al., 2021). In the UK, the work of linking climate to worker health and safety concerns is developing rapidly now. In Scotland, Unison and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) worked with Adaptation Scotland to produce a handbook and workbook that make “the case for adaptation from a Trade Union ... perspective” and help activists identify “climate change hazards in their workplace” and “take action to build resilience and protect workers from the unavoidable impacts of climate change” (Adaptation Scotland, 2021). In developing these resources, labour educators drew deliberately on pre-existing union health and safety frameworks:

Climate change will clearly impact on people’s health and safety. The tools that trade union reps use to look at health and safety are the same tools that will be needed for climate change adaptation. Both rely on risk assessment, both rely on hazards identification, both rely on risk matrix, both rely on investigation ... The legal rights that trade union health and safety reps have are ... very important in [taking action on] climate change, because they’re actually stronger than any other rights [that union reps have]. (Research interview, May 2023)

Through focusing on adaptation to climate change impacts and mobilising union learning, health and safety frameworks, union activists open up a clear direction for campaigning and negotiating demands that unions can present to employers and the state. As another labour educator involved in the Scottish climate adaptation project points out:

Once you put the health and safety slant on it, and the fact that it’s protecting workers and ... empowering workers to think about solutions that will bring about other benefits that may be more central to the trade union movement, ... I think that echoes with a lot of trade unionists. That’s something they can really feel passionate about acting on and campaigning on.

Indeed, an explicit aim for many engaged in this adaptation work is not just to address the local impacts of climate change but, through this work, to move union members and activists to act on the larger problem of climate crisis as a matter of urgent concern. An issue such as air pollution, says an organiser with the Hazards Centre Network (a group that works with unions and workers on occupational health and safety issues), can be a way to get workers talking about “the elephant in the room” that is climate change, make climate change more local and concrete, “make the invisible visible”, and enable workers “to take ownership of the issue” and identify local solutions to the problem.

In these developments, the Covid pandemic has played an important role. While the pandemic

shut down much of the climate mobilisation in the UK that had developed around the school climate strikes in 2019, it enabled new forms of climate activism to emerge in the UK union movement. It brought health and safety to the forefront of the organising agenda. My union “hasn’t traditionally had a ... high profile around health and safety”, says a teacher unionist in London; “It was only when Covid came that everybody en-masse suddenly realised ... that you can take collective action under health and safety law and ... everybody got excited about Section 44” (part of the UK Employment Rights Act that gives workers the right to refuse to work in workplaces they believe to be unsafe). In Scotland, the climate adaptation project of Unison and the STUC was launched in summer 2020, “once the first horrible wave of the pandemic was waning”, when “there was the realisation that frontline workers were particularly vulnerable to fast paced and emergent hazards” and concern to “understand what we need to be lobbying for when it comes to climate hazards” (Research interview, May 2023). The pandemic also got unions engaged in the project of workplace transformation. A labour educator in Wales, for example, who focuses on climate adaptation, explained that this work followed from helping workers adapt to the pandemic, when many were forced to shift online and rapidly develop a new set of digital service delivery skills.

The power and potential of adaptation strategies

Though relatively new, labour education and action on climate adaptation in the UK shows considerable promise. One way it does so is to make visible the degree to which climate change is already impacting workers, and the wide range of these impacts. In Ceredigion (West Wales), Unison ran a workshop with public sector union activists to learn about their experiences and concerns of “working in extreme weather”. The educator running the session talks about the insights that emerged from the workshop discussions:

I had operations managers from highways, people from logistics and distribution, parking, grounds, refuse collectors, street cleaners.... The parking manager was saying about the impact of the heatwave last summer... There was an influx of people coming from England and other parts of Wales to the coast, which created parking chaos. In the coastal resorts, they had to reallocate teams, cancel leave ... Then there are some members of his team who are older or overweight, got pre-existing health conditions, and the risks to those people ... In a storm, the parking attendants ... afterwards are drafted in to mop up, sweep up, clean up, they go and support other services. So, these are the kinds of implications of climate events that [aren’t often] talked about, and all of the different kinds of skills, and workplace needs, and health and safety risks that come in on that.

A key here is the principle of creating spaces to listen to workers’ voices and learn their concerns about the impacts of climate change in their lives. Unison’s workshop in Wales was run on the model of co-design, an approach in which local communities (or workers) are invited to use their own knowledge to identify and analyse local problems and develop local solutions (Iniesto et al., 2022). The Adaptation Scotland project likewise developed its climate adaptation handbook and workbook based on input from workshops and interviews with seventy union activists working in all sectors of the Scottish economy. “We tried to co-create the guidance,” says a labour educator on the project. “It was drawing on their lived experience, their knowledge of trade union protocols and the ways things are done, and then our climate ... adaptation knowledge.”

Trade union adaptation strategies help to put a concern with worker and climate justice at the heart of climate education and action. The first questions that the STUC, Unison and Adaptation Scotland workbook on adaptation asks union activists to consider are “who will be most vulnerable to climate risks” in their workplace and local community, and “who may need support to increase their (climate) resilience” (Adaptation Scotland, 2022b: 5, 6). “Climate change is a stress multiplier which will disproportionately affect those who are already most disadvantaged,” notes the

accompanying handbook. “As was highlighted during the pandemic, frontline and low paid workers tend to be amongst the most vulnerable groups so are likely to be less able to adapt to emerging threats” (Adaptation Scotland, 2022a: 7). Discussions of climate adaptation can lead to broader reflections on the factors that make some workers particularly vulnerable, including lack of voice, power, status and recognition in the workplace. Not only is this mobilising and linked into traditional union concerns, but it also helps to move away from the technicist, apolitical “win-win” framework that has often characterised previous workplace greening agendas. Instead, trade union action on the climate crisis becomes a central part of class struggle (Huber, 2019). “The climate and environmental crisis is a class issue”, as Jeremy Corbyn (2021) and others have argued: “It is the poorest people in working-class communities, in polluted cities, and in low-lying island communities who suffer first and worst in this crisis.”

In a cross-union organising discussion at a university in England on how to respond to the impacts of the 2022 summer heatwave, climate adaptation was thus tied directly to broader campaigns against precarity in the higher education sector. “We were hearing from all the different people [across the university] who were having to work in non-ventilated rooms,” says a campus union activist, and “the more precarious they are, the less leverage they have, it’s just the same thing over and over again”. For the National Education Union (NEU), a response to the heatwave was linked to campaigns for better workplace conditions. The impact of the heatwave “was made worse by the fact that so many of our [school] buildings are not fit for purpose, and class sizes have got bigger”, says a teacher unionist, “so we’ve got more people crowded into smaller classrooms, and buildings that are in such a bad state that you can’t open windows”. For the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT), the union response to the fatal 2020 Stonehaven derailment – caused by a combination of extreme weather made more likely by climate change and poor track maintenance by a private contractor – joined calls for safe adaptation to a changing climate with campaigns against rail privatisation and railway maintenance staff layoffs (Research interview, July 2023; TSSA, 2021; Williams, 2022).

The climate adaptation framework opens up a whole set of clear bargaining and campaigning demands for unions around climate, as well as a broader vision of what a just social and economic transformation should look like. The FBU is a prime example of this, as the union has used the idea that firefighters are on the frontline of fighting the climate crisis as the basis for arguing for increased funding for the fire service, reversal of a decade of job cuts in the sector, provision of appropriate resources, tools and training for tackling wildfires and floods, and creation of a statutory duty for firefighters to respond to flooding events in England (FBU, 2020; Wrack, 2021). PCS is similarly developing “a model collective agreement on working in a warmer world”, that marks the union’s “recognition that climate change is here”, and that “it’s a workplace issue to negotiate around” (Research interview, October 2022). In the UK, much of the discussion on labour, climate change and a just transition has focused on workers whose jobs are threatened by climate change policy, such as oil and gas workers in the North Sea. Trade union adaptation strategies help to shift attention to possibilities of work transformation and job creation in a just transition for other groups of workers as well. This is essential for being able to build a cross-sector coalition of trade unions and worker organisations focused on the climate crisis as a central concern for all workers – what has previously been called for as a “powerful low-carbon labour movement”, “labour-climate movement”, or “working class climate movement” (Aronoff et al., 2019; Rosenblum, 2022; Vachon, 2023).

In London, for example, a teacher unionist explains how her school provided shelter for a group of youths during a flash flood, and points to this as a future model for new climate roles for schools:

Three years ago, there was some flash flooding on the road outside my [primary] school. We're in a new build, so our school is quite well designed for this kind of weather.... Just as the really heavy rain was coming, about five teenage girls arrived at our door... I opened the door and said, "Can I help you?" They said, "Miss, Miss, we've got nowhere to go, we can't get home, there's a flood down there." ... They came in and waited. And the thing is, they knew they were safe.... I can foresee that is what will happen [more in the future], ... because that's what's happening in the Global South.... Schools become the safe haven when these extreme weather events occur.... I think it was in the Philippines, where schools were set up as a safe place for people to go, they were bringing in water and food ... to the school to feed the community because they were left homeless ... or had to be temporarily evacuated.

In Wales, Unison has started to develop this idea with its members in a workshop called *Climate Action at Work*, that is "aimed at showing social care workers and school staff and NHS staff their important place in the climate fight, getting them active and seeing climate action as a vital part of their role". A labour educator who helped to develop the workshop explains the rationale behind the project:

We did an event [at Unison] called "Caring for Our Climate," which started to bring together some ideas around care as low carbon work and about the gendered nature of how we look at green jobs and green skills.... The more I read and listened, ... the clearer it became the vital role in climate resilience and adaptation that frontline public service workers play... When you think it through, it's care home workers who are taking Mrs Jones out of a flooded care home and keeping Mr Jones alive during a heatwave, and it's our leisure centre workers who were putting people up in emergency accommodation during the floods, and it's local authority planning teams and street cleaning teams and waste teams who are absolutely vital to the whole agenda.

Building recognition of social care work as "low carbon vital climate resilience work," the Unison educator points out, has importance for future union bargaining and campaigning agendas. In the context of the climate crisis, it creates "a potential opportunity for growing public services", for "raising the value of that work", and opening up "a route to higher wages and higher funding and better skills" by "changing the status" of care work, so that it is seen "as a really valuable job ... that's important for our communities, [as well as] the climate". Unison's climate adaptation work directly echoes recent calls for a "Green New Deal for Care" and a "Feminist Green New Deal" (Battistoni, 2022; Cohen and MacGregor, 2020). Here, the argument is that concepts of just transitions and green jobs need to be broadened, such that care work is revalued and recognised as a vital form of "climate work" and an "integral part of a transition to a green economy" (Cohen and MacGregor, 2020: 19; United Workers Union, 2021; see also Public Services International, 2022).

The challenges and risks of adaptation strategies

In May 2023, the UK Labour Party announced that, if elected, it would block new oil and gas development in the North Sea, something climate activists have long called for. The announcement was quickly met with criticism from Unite and GMB, the two largest private sector unions in the country, who called Labour's plans "naïve", "wrong" and "reckless" (Quinn, 2023; Zeffman, 2023). Part of the union concern was about ensuring a just transition for oil and gas workers moving out of the sector. But it was also because the official position of Unite and GMB, as well as the TUC, is still to embrace future production of fossil fuels, alongside the development of green energy, as part of a "balanced energy mix" (Hookes, 2017). This points to one of the key challenges for the UK union movement's climate adaptation strategies: do these help to open up a conversation about what needs to be done to address the root causes of the climate crisis (that is, end fossil fuel production), or do they work to avoid having this conversation to begin with?

Pelling (2011) argues that climate change adaptation should be a space for conscious social reform, contesting change rather than passively accommodating to it, and creating alternative futures (O'Brien, 2012). For this to happen, adaptation needs to be closely linked with an agenda of climate change mitigation. "Adapting to climate change ... requires strategies that address [the] root causes [of climate change] as well as the more proximate concerns", writes Pelling (2011: 176). Indeed, Pelling suggests, mitigation should be seen "not as a separate domain but as a subset of adaptation", as it is effectively "an adaptive act aimed at ameliorating or reversing the root causes of the anthropocentric forcing processes behind climate change" (Pelling, 2011: 22). Close integration of adaptation and mitigation strategies can perhaps best be seen in the UK trade union movement in the approach taken by the FBU. While the FBU's climate agenda foregrounds a concern with climate change adaptation and its implications for firefighters, it links this "immediate industrial and safety issue" with the need to participate in a broader, global climate movement. As FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack (2021) writes:

For the FBU, ... climate change and extreme weather pose immediate safety issues, about PPE, resources, safe procedures, and the need for sustainable investment. But we can't stop there. Firefighters alone, even adequately resourced, can only help to mitigate the impact of climate change related events. Further action requires us to join together with a wider movement. We recognise that our position and our struggle is inextricably linked with the need to campaign for change internationally – and that change has to be fundamental.

For the FBU, fundamental change that can address the root causes of the climate crisis includes challenging "the narrow interests" of the "100 companies ... responsible for seventy-one percent of global [carbon] emissions" and "their endless drive for profit", and calling for "democratic social ownership and control over ... our energy, transport, and finance systems", as part of a "green industrial revolution with workers, trade unions, and communities at its heart" (Wrack, 2021).

But other trade union adaptation strategies in the UK do not appear to share such a radical, transformative social politics. As a labour educator involved in the STUC, Unison and Adaptation Scotland project on climate adaptation in the workplace points out, one of the motivations for the project was to work around the divisive question of continuing fossil fuel production and development in the country:

I think they saw [climate adaptation] as a uniting topic for the trade union movement. Because particularly in Scotland, with historically ... a dependence on the hydrocarbon industry, climate change has always been quite a divisive topic for the unions – the split between the blue-collar view that it's jobs versus the environment, and the white-collar view that this is something we should be caring about, it's social justice. They felt that approaching [climate change] through the health and safety angle, and the climate risk angle, rather than seeking attribution about [climate] mitigation, net zero, who's to blame, they felt that was a way they could unite the union movement.

The question then becomes whether this move to find common ground in the trade union movement on the issue of climate adaptation will increase or decrease the likelihood of trade unions also finding agreement on the urgent need for climate mitigation as well, or the need to put a quick end to a fossil fuel-based economy in the country.

Trade union adaptation strategies face two related challenges or risks. One is the danger that adaptation strategies focus solely or primarily on incremental rather than the larger structural changes needed to address the climate crisis. The Adaptation Scotland project deliberately adopted the model of risk assessment checklists used by union health and safety reps to support union activists in making climate adaptation demands in their workplaces, with the idea that these are tools that are simple, familiar, accessible, practical and easy to use. "Trade unionists love a checklist", says a labour educator involved with the project, "so that was why the checklist was central to [the climate adaptation workbook]". But the local workplace inspection checklist

approach runs the risk of shifting attention from broader issues that significantly impact both the climate crisis and its local impacts. When addressing the problem of air pollution on the railroad, for example, there is a massive difference between demanding that employers install local air quality monitors and filters versus demanding that the government follow through on its commitment to electrify the country's rail network (Research interview, July 2023). "It feels like trying to divert the flow of a river by poking sticks in it", a labour educator says of some of the climate adaptation strategies promoted in the Adaptation Scotland project. "What union reps can do in individual workplaces is incremental", the educator says, when "there needs to be a transformative shift" in design standards, legislation and regulation, and "this work probably won't achieve that". The hope is that "raising the profile of what adaptation is" and educating unionists that "we need to be thinking about this collectively and holistically" will help to build union support for "the transformative change that's needed" to address the climate crisis effectively.

The other is that a focus on climate adaptation can lead to the prioritisation of local agendas and actions over global ones, when a global framework is needed to address the climate crisis effectively and fairly. "A deliberate focus on the local and the immediate" that is found in climate adaptation strategies, write Nyberg et al. (2023: 110), "serves to defer the temporal and political implications of climate change", and "in turn, the hegemonic legacy of the crisis is perpetuated". "The localised ways in which adaptation occurs", the authors add, "not only reinforce but also amplify existing divisions between the wealthy and the poor" across the planet (Nyberg et al., 2023: 125). Here, unions in the UK have sought to build internationalism into their work on climate change and climate adaptation in an effort to avoid this problem. The STUC, Unison and Adaptation Scotland handbook for unionists to organise for climate adaptation measures in Scottish workplaces opens with a recognition that "the Global South has contributed least to the climate emergency ... but will experience the worst impacts and has the least capacity to adapt", and argues that "a powerful way of demonstrating solidarity is to put our own house in order by significantly reducing emissions and increasing climate resilience in Scotland while sharing learning in a two-way dialogue with trade unionists from the Global South" (Adaptation Scotland, 2022a: 7). Adaptation is "an international issue, climate change has no borders, and health and safety doesn't either", says a labour educator involved in producing the handbook; "We've done quite a lot of work over the years trying to look at the transfer of risk from the developed world to the Global South, and what trade unions can do." Unions such as UCU, NEU, Unison and PCS work with international union bodies such as Education International, Public Services International and Trade Unions for Energy Democracy on climate, and integrate information and ideas from these groups into their climate education and action programmes. Unite, in its new five-day environmental training course for union activists, includes an activity in which activists are asked to develop a "pen pal" relationship on behalf of either your branch or sector" with a "trade unionist or climate change activist" from a country in the Global South to talk about climate and environmental concerns (Unite, 2022: 13).

Conclusion

A growing number of climate crisis scholars and activists argue that an effective and just climate movement needs to have the direct participation of the trade union movement (Aronoff et al., 2019; Huber, 2022; Saltmarsh, 2021). The argument is that making the radical, transformative changes needed to address the climate crisis "will require massive leverage over the political and economic system" and "the ability to force these changes over the objection of broad sections of the capitalist class, who are fiercely unwilling to lose their profits". One group that has this

“leverage” is “working people, united and organised” who “not only [have] the numbers as the majority of society” but also “a ‘lever’ at the core of the operation of the capitalist system” so that “if workers stop working, or go on strike, business as usual grinds to a halt” (Brown et al., 2019).

Though this argument is compelling in theory, a close look at the contemporary engagement of trade unions in the UK with the climate crisis shows that even those unions that are most engaged with climate, and take on the most radical, transformative stances, face real challenges in mobilising worker interest, union capacity and collective action around fighting the climate crisis in a sustained and effective manner. The embrace of climate adaptation strategies by the UK trade union movement represents one strategic response for addressing these challenges. It is through these strategies that unions are seeking to make the link between a changing climate and workers’ material interests, and connect “material improvements in people’s lives to climate action” (Huber, 2022: 198). As Huber (2018) suggests, building a “climate movement that appeals to the needs of the working class” can start by arguing that “it is the working class as a whole who has and will continue to suffer the worst consequences of climate change”, and grow by framing “climate solutions ... in ways that make clear how they will directly improve” working class lives.

It is not just in the UK labour movement that we can now see this focus on climate adaptation. In the United States in 2023, for example, the Teamsters negotiated with UPS to equip its vehicles with “air conditioning systems, new heat shields, and additional fans” to address the problem of working in an increasingly hot climate (Teamsters, 2023); a battle has emerged in Texas over the rights of construction workers to get water breaks when working in extreme heat (Singh, 2023b); and in California, farmworkers have lobbied the state for wage replacement programs when they are unable to work due to storms, flooding, heatwaves and wildfires (Singh, 2023a). As these labour climate adaptation strategies develop, it will be important to attend both to their strengths – grounding climate action in the voices and experiences of workers, centring climate action around a concern with worker and social justice and building a transformative bargaining and negotiating agenda – but also their potential risks and weaknesses. Otherwise, there remains a possibility that organised labour’s climate response becomes mired in continued acquiescence to the fossil fuel status quo, incrementalist approaches to change, and preoccupation with local rather than global climate justice concerns.

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