

## Book Review

**Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause and Dimitris Stevis (eds.) (2020)**  
***Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift towards a Low-carbon World.*** London: Pluto Press. ISBN: 97800745339924.  
**240 pp. Paperback and e-book £29.99.**

*Reviewed by*

*Judson Abraham, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA*

The thinking behind just transition is simple: workers in polluting industries and their communities deserve public compensation for the burdens that environmental protection measures place upon their livelihoods. The term “just transition” comes from the plucky, embattled US labour movement, but the phrase has, in recent years, entered the lexicon of mainstream environmentalism. With mainstream acceptance come new debates over how best to define and implement just transition. Some labour and environmental activists now allege that neo-liberals seek to dilute the concept. The new volume, *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift towards a Low-carbon World*, explores emerging debates over just transition. The book covers efforts by unions and community members to preserve the concept of just transition’s integrity even as governments and corporations with little apparent commitment to labour attempt to appropriate it.

The editors’ introduction presents the political stakes of debates over just transition. Governments should compensate those left behind in the emerging green economy because failure to do so may provoke social upheaval and political reaction. Think of the Yellow Vests movement in France. Think of Donald Trump in the United States. The editors also provide a clarifying history of just transition that covers the concept’s development from its origins among unionised workers in the US petrochemical industry in the 1970s and 1980s, its use by North American environmental justice groups in the 1990s, and its later diffusion among global labour institutions like the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). I appreciate the editors’ decision to highlight the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union (OCAW)’s original standards for just transition: workers who lose jobs to environmental protections should receive relocation assistance, full wage replacement until they retire or find comparable jobs, four years of free higher education, and stipends if no jobs are available after retraining. Contemporary discussions of just transition too often overlook this powerful vision of assistance for vulnerable workers. It is worth noting that none of the just transitions covered in this book live up to OCAW’s conditions for a just transition. The authors are ambivalent toward their case studies and avoid the exuberant optimism that often typifies discussions of sustainable development policies and social justice activism.

Anabella Rosemberg’s chapter “‘No Jobs on a Dead Planet’: The International Trade Union Movement and Just Transition” explains how unions’ advocacy for just transition at climate diplomacy forums strengthens organised labour’s internationalism. In the build-up to the 2009 United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen, the ITUC began reaching out to national union federations and encouraging them to embrace ambitious national and international emissions goals separate from those of national governments and employers. The

ITUC and its affiliated think tank Sustainlabour nudged unions in the Global South to refrain from supporting state commitments to growth through mineral extractivism and convinced some unions in the Global North to recognise their countries' historic responsibilities for the climate crisis. Rosemberg stresses just transition's value for getting "unions and ultimately workers to be in a position to support ambitious climate action, and in the process, re-place the values of international solidarity at the heart of both the union and climate agendas" (p. 53). Anyone interested in contemporary labour internationalism will find Rosemberg's piece intriguing.

Two chapters describe capitalists' endeavours to define just transition on their own terms. Nils Moussu's "Business in Just Transition: The Never-ending Story of Corporate Sustainability" discusses publications about just transition by transnational business associations like the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. Some business associations' just transition literature appeals to key union desires, such as tripartitism and the ILO's core labour standards. However, the business associations' texts leave out any mention of labour's demand for corporations to bear the costs of transitioning fossil fuel workers into new jobs. Caleb Goods further scrutinises the business community in his chapter "Australian Business: Embracing, Reconceptualizing, or Ignoring a Just Transition in Australia". Goods explains that hard-line opposition to just transition and other climate protection policies is the norm among Australia's business class. When Australian business leaders have engaged with the notion of just transition, "it has often led to the reinterpretation of ideas and principles associated with the term in a way that serves their short-term interests – rather than the common good" (p. 85). Goods shares examples of big business's ridiculous attempts to twist the meaning of just transition that you will have to read for yourself to believe.

Two more chapters explore frontline community groups' uses of the just transition framework to respond to pollution and economic disempowerment. Kali Akuno's "Tales from the Frontlines: Building a People-led Just Transition in Jackson, Mississippi" details the approach of the Black Power-influenced organisation Cooperation Jackson to just transition. Cooperation Jackson creates green employment opportunities in an underserved, polluted transportation and logistics hub. With backing from local labour unions and churches, Cooperation Jackson envisions a just transition involving a local network of worker- and community-controlled cooperatives engaged in sustainable production. The chapter "What Transition? Collectively Imagining a Just and Low-carbon Future for Río Negro, Argentina" by Martín Álvarez Mullally, Fernando Cabrera Christiansen and Lauren Maffei examines community responses to hydrofracking in the Vaca Muerta region of Northern Patagonia. The chapter focuses on the work of *Mesa de Transición Post Petrolera* (Mesa, the Post Petroleum Transition Roundtable), which conceives of just transition as a way for frontline communities to protect their resources and livelihoods from fossil fuel extraction. The Mesa associates just transition with efforts to protect Vaca Muerta's farming economy from pollution and to improve working conditions for farmers by, for example, stopping corporate concentration in agriculture. If farming becomes a more attractive option to workers, so the thinking goes, then fewer people will support hydrofracking as a source of jobs.

The remaining chapters investigate fossil fuel workers' union activism for just transitions in various national contexts. In "Resource Rich and Access Poor: Securing a Just Transition to Renewables in South Africa" Sandra van Niekerk presents the argument of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) that an authentic just transition will require a "socially owned renewable energy sector" made up of energy cooperatives and municipally owned utilities (p. 133). NUMSA claims that only a socialised renewable sector can create enough jobs and generate cheap enough energy not only to provide alternative employment for redundant coal workers but also to end energy poverty. Alexander Reitzenstein, Sabrina Schulz and Felix

Heilmann's chapter "The Story of Coal in Germany: A Model for Just Transition in Europe?" is a noteworthy contribution to the just transition literature because it calls into question the value of German-style tripartite industrial planning for energy transitions. Many discussions of Germany's energy transition praise the use of social dialogue to assure just outcomes for displaced coal workers (for example, Smith, 2020). However, Reitzenstein, Schulz and Heilmann make the case that multi-stakeholder negotiations between Länder governments, unions and employers needlessly slow the country's coal phase-out by enabling incumbents, including an energetic miners' union, to delay necessary climate protection measures. In "A Top-down Transition: A Critical Account of Canada's Government-led Phase-out of the Coal Sector" Hadrian Mertins-Kirkwood and Ian Hussey criticise the modesty of Alberta's transition assistance for coal workers as Canadians decommission their remaining coal-fired power plants. Alberta's provincial government, responding to organised labour's demands, provides redundant coal workers with 75 per cent wage replacement for up to forty-five weeks. Mertins-Kirkwood and Hussey argue that much more generous compensation will be necessary when Canada phases out oil and natural gas, which will result in many more job losses under less favourable conditions. Finally, Darryn Snell's "Just Transition Solutions and Challenges in a Neoliberal and Carbon-intensive Economy" recounts Australian unions' efforts to facilitate a just transition for workers at the decommissioned Hazelwood Power Station in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. Unions representing workers at the coal plant developed a worker transfer scheme that required other, nearby plants to hire former Hazelwood workers in return for government subsidies. Nonetheless, even after taking the subsidies, employers at the Loy Yang power plant did not hire enough ex-Hazelwood workers to absorb all the layoffs. Successful just transition programmes, Snell concludes, require labour and the state to encroach on private employers' power over hiring and firing.

*Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift towards a Low-carbon World* covers the perils of allowing big business and mainstream politicians to define the notion of just transition, and magnifies the struggles of labour and community groups to reclaim and build upon this concept. This book is a needed response to attempts by the likes of Richard Branson and Michael Bloomberg to misconstrue just transition. The book reveals how genuine just transitions require active government, strong unions and a break from neo-liberal common sense. The volume's examination of just transitions in a wide variety of political and institutional settings will please comparativists. Labour scholars will find that the writers consistently emphasise workers' agency in campaigns for just transitions. Read this book.

## REFERENCE

Smith, Samantha (2020) Just Transition: Replacing Fear with Hope. *Social Europe*. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/just-transition-replacing-fear-with-hope> (last accessed 12 June 2020).

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JUDSON ABRAHAM is an instructor of political science at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. [Email: [judson9@vt.edu](mailto:judson9@vt.edu)]