TRADE UNIONS AND THE MULTIPLE CRISIS OF ENVIROMENT, SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND WORK

A SMALL CASE STUDY OF THE EUROPEAN AVIATION SECTOR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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> *There are, after all, no flights and no jobs on a dead planet.*
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> **(IG Metall)**

European societies are facing multiple crises in the spheres of ecology, society, the economy, and work. Historically, trade union movements have been powerful vehicles of emancipatory power, bringing liberation to large numbers of people. While societies need an organised labour movement more than ever, to face and fight the multiple crises, the onset of neoliberalism has severely weakened the power of unions, and created many short-term pressures and crises that are seemingly antithetical to the larger environmental crises.

This is of critical urgency, as the 2020s are the last decade for global societies to avoid, or at least slow down, the 'Hothouse Earth' scenario of runaway climate heating. It will be increasingly difficult to stabilise the warming of the planet's climate, once different feedback loops kick in (such as the Arctic melting, and forest dieback), setting global societies on an irreversible path of increasingly extreme heat risks and an existential threat to civilisation.

In this report we focus on the case study of unions in the aviation sector, to see how different trade unions are dealing with, or indeed struggling to deal with, the pressures of the multiple crises.

We further provide an in-depth background and framework focusing on the latest environmental science relating to the multiple crises. We discuss the 'treadmill of production' economic system and its environmental effects, as well as different narratives of climate delay which have delayed action.

We then proceed to look more closely at developments in labour research and environmental labour studies, looking at different ways that union environmentalism has been analysed previously, and how different union approaches to the environmental and social crises can be catalogued along 'market' or 'neoliberal', 'state' or 'ecomodernist', and 'class/society' or 'social-ecological transformation' axes.

In Section 3, we find that trade union leaders frame priorities and solutions to address the multiple crises in different ways, in coherence with our theoretical lenses. By analysing the Ryanair 2018 European strike, we argue that when trade unions manage to politicise workplace struggles on a transnational level, a number of advancements in labour rights can be achieved even in the most neoliberal contexts. However, the formation of a solid European labour movement is still far from being completed, with inequalities in access to representation and collective bargaining that persist across the EU.

Finally, in Section 4 we provide policy advice on both the sectoral level (aviation), on the meso level of trade union organisation, and more macro level policy advice on policies needed for the social-ecological transformation of society in line with environmental science and human welfare needs.

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

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A 'socio-ecological contract' has emerged as a way to conceive together the transitions needed to steer out of today's crises to safer harbour.[...] [T]he trade union movement has a rich tradition. It has been a key actor in the struggles for decent wages and social protection but also over health and safety, working conditions, worker participation and working-time reduction – and, in particular, in the debate on alienation and liberation from work. This heritage should make unions key figures in setting the narrative [of the social-ecological transformation].

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Philippe Pochet, ETUI (Pochet 2021)

Historically, trade unions and workers' movements have been the most powerful, widespread, and fruitful social movements bringing emancipation to large numbers of people around the world, albeit with a great deal of diversity in their makeup, tactics and cultures (Berberoglu 2019). The European Trade Union movement was born largely in the late 18th century to meet the challenges of the industrial revolution. Today, although there are many examples of trade unions taking innovative steps to represent workers while moving towards the future, it is still mostly a creature of that time. With multiple crises facing workers and society in both the short and long term (environmental crises, health crises, inequality, economic crises, the crises of work, and the crises of care) as well as the new digital transition, it is clear that Europe needs a progressive and future-focused trade union movement.

Whilst struggling to meet these challenges, trade unions are largely locked into an industrial-era model of organising to control individual workplaces. This served the movement well in the era when an individual joined a factory or occupation as an apprentice and largely stayed in this profession until retiring at the end of their working life. Indeed, in places where that still holds and there are only a handful of employers, the trade union movement remains relatively strong.

Examples of this include the public sector, where the state is the only employer, some manufacturing sectors such as steel or automotives, or, as we will see in more detail, the aviation sector. However, these types of job are increasingly less common. In the gig economy, in non-graduate white-collar sectors such as call centres and in the newer white-collar professions, such as digital marketing, the trade union movement has in many cases little to no presence. What connects these is the frequent movement between employers of workers, which is not something the trade union movement is, as presently constituted, set up to deal with.

However, the new, multiple challenges brought by the environmental crises and social crises are striking unions even in those sectors where they remain strong. The nature of tasks is also changing due to the implementation of new technologies which progressively require different sets of skills and thus the need for training to avoid the threat of job polarisation. New management practices, made possible by algorithms and big data analytics, are raising concerns with regards to job quality and a potential deterioration of democracy at work; especially in the gig economy, where unions are fragmented at best, or absent at worst, and workers are most precarious.

The 2008 economic crisis has led to a scenario in which collective bargaining and union influence overall dropped in Europe, with growing pressures from employers to shift towards decentralised systems of negotiation. This has accelerated a growing trend away from trade union membership. Across Europe, trade union density has halved (with large variations across member states), compared to its heyday in the late 1970s (Furåker 2020).

All of these issues can be negotiated at either the local, national, or European level, allowing unions to develop a wide range of strategies to address them. This is particularly relevant for the social-ecological transformation, as unions can play a decisive role in shaping industrial policies at multiple levels to conjugate the future of jobs with environmental needs, and where cross-border cooperation is particularly vital.

1.1 Research objectives and methodology

Against this backdrop, this paper is informed by the assumption that trade unions should not be considered as a united block with homogeneous preferences, but rather as social actors characterised by different ideologies and logics of representation (for example, focus on entire workforce vs members only). Such differences are also rooted in the various national cultural/institutional environments in which trade unions operate: Nordic countries' pride in their voluntarist systems and Central Eastern European (CEE) unions' structural weakness, for instance, have historically made full European co-operation very complicated to achieve. Furthermore, trade unions themselves are arenas of competing views and interests, where different political crises, narratives, actors, and groups vie for dominance.

To dive into the way in which trade unions react to current challenges, we will focus on the two main questions below, zooming in on a case study of the aviation sector:

- In what way are trade unions prepared to address the multifaceted challenges determined by the multiple crises facing societies – including in the spheres of the environment, society, economy, and work?

- How can different unions strengthen coalitions to develop common strategies at the European level?

In this paper we focus on a case study of the aviation sector, as the sector where the multiple crises of society are most clearly crystallised: not only is the aviation sector environmentally contentious, but it has also been affected to a larger degree than most other sectors by precarisation, price dumping, and worsening work conditions and pay (Blyton 1992; Glassner et al 2011; Keun 2015). This makes the case of the aviation sector an excellent study and example for the main challenges unions are facing today. It allows us to analyse how unions' power resources (structural, associational, institutional) were and still are in decline in such contexts while examining how different unions manage the challenges of adopting effective representation strategies to face the multiple crises facing workers and society.

To this end, we conduct a review of current literature, and undertake empirical research to assess the current state of trade unions in the aviation sector in Europe. What are the main factors that obstruct effective union environmental action and transnational cooperation? How do unions interact with their members, other parts of workers' movements and workers themselves? The review provides us with the basis and framework to analyse our empirical data, and to help us contextualise and synthesise whether trade unions are ready to respond to the changes workers face, what they are doing to prepare for such changes, and how successful they have been at addressing them thus far.

The empirical part of this report is based on in-depth expert interviews in key European countries. The interviewees are representatives of workers in the aviation sector in four European countries – Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. The semi-structured interviews are based on a jointly developed questionnaire, and have been coded with a commonly established coding scheme. These interviews provide a backdrop to, and context and important on-the-ground experience for, the literature review.

Unfortunately, the empirical research of this report focuses solely on unions in early EU accession states. The reason why the trade union interviews focus on trade unions in Western Europe only is due to the weak and fragmented nature of unions in CEE countries, especially in the aviation sector, as well as the lack of available interview partners that wished to be interviewed for this project. We do believe that a much stronger focus on the possibilities and strategies for trade union penetration in CEE countries is crucial – especially since airlines are increasingly targeting and exploiting workers from CEE countries, using CEE workers against workers in early accession states in a race to the bottom of wages and working conditions.We hope to focus on trade union strategies in the sector in CEE countries more in the future. At the same time, we also see a role and possibilities for stronger unions in early accession states in recruiting and unionising workers from CEE countries across the shop floor (for example, IG Metall in the car industry in Hungary). Therefore, the focus on Western European unions can have wider implications for trade union penetration also in CEE countries.

Although we registered some differences among the identified priorities, interviewees acknowledged several issues in a similar way, such as the need for a co-ordinated ecological/technological transition, in line with our theoretical lenses. Unions also already cooperate with social movements advocating for necessary action to face the environmental crisis. Yet they find themselves in a difficult position, often seeing a need to prioritise short-term gains for their workers over systemic change. The case of Ryanair shows that in certain circumstances, barriers to collaboration can be overcome; despite this, Europe-wide trade union co-operation still remains a rare exception. The recommendations made at the end of this report address these issues and propose possible solutions.

The remaining sections of this report are organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and provides the background and framework for the study. This includes a brief overview of the latest environmental science on the environmental and social crises, the current state of the art in labour studies and environmental labour studies, and a review of the aviation sector. Section 3 first briefly documents the research method and design of the study, thereafter providing a detailed exposition of the empirical research, and situating the findings of the analysis in the framework and wider literature. Finally, based on the outcomes of the research, Section 4 provides tentative conclusions, as well as recommendations and policy advice:

• on the sectoral level, suggesting specific policies for workers and unions active in the aviation industry in Europe;

• on the broader level of the European trade union movement, suggesting policies and making more general recommendations for workers and trade unions for a good life for all within Earth's carrying capacity;

• making recommendations for other actors and institutions involved in progressive causes.

We put an especially strong emphasis on the 'new social-ecological contract' concept of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), which is based on a strong understanding of environmental science (Laurent 2021; ETUI 2021), and new research on post-growth welfare states (eg Bohnenberger and Fritz 2021).

BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

2. BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

2.1 The multiple crises – environment, society, economy, and future of work

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Ecological crises are a social risk threatening Europeans' lives and livelihoods, especially the most vulnerable: close to 100,000 Europeans have died because of these increasingly violent ecological shocks in the past four decades, while many more have been driven into poverty or precariousness by losing their homes, property and social networks. It is reasonable to think that we are facing at least two or three decades of ecological shocks because of the destabilisation of the biosphere in the past six decades.

These human losses are going to skyrocket if we do not build adequate collective social-ecological protections. Those social-ecological risks should be pooled in order to reduce their economic cost and social injustice using the same institution that has proven so successful in fostering human development for a century in Europe and so strategic in the face of the Covid crisis. This is the welfare state, which should evolve into a social-ecological state.

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Eloi Laurent, ETUI (Laurent 2021)

2.1.1 The environmental crises - a brief overview

We are globally facing multiple, interrelated crises that threaten to undermine the future welfare of societies. The environmental crises challenge the current organisation of economy and society, and the basis of welfare states – increasing economic production, growth, tax revenues and full employment. In addition to the environmental crises, societies in Europe are also facing the challenges of rising inequality, the hollowing out of welfare states, and increasing precarisation, flexibilisation, automation, and digitalisation at work – which further threaten societal welfare and make it difficult to face the environmental crises.

The manifold short-term problems that require immediate (and sometimes seemingly antithetical) action make it difficult to take on the longer-term problem of the environmental crises.

Welfare in European societies, starting with industrialisation, and especially since the postwar era, was built on a broad societal agreement between labour, state, and business, on the benefits of increasing production, full-time work, economic growth and increasing state revenues (Foster 2005; Gould et al 2004; Schnaiberg 1980). Since this model of welfare will be increasingly impossible to follow in the 'Hothouse Earth' of the 2020s, trade unions and workers' organisations, as well as other progressive actors, will need to push for new ways of providing for societal welfare within planetary limits.

This is increasingly difficult, as in the current era of flexibilised capitalism and neoliberal globalisation, trade unions have become marginalised actors facing many more challenges at once. The increasing hypermobility of capital since the 1970s against an immobile labour and state has weakened the bargaining power and position of labour, and encouraged a 'race to the bottom' of labour regulation and laws, as all the world's

workers are increasingly forced to compete against one another in a single labour market (Silver 2003). Global labour surplus 'is here to stay' (Scherrer 2013), while workers in competing countries are being played off against each other. This requires a common and concentrated action on behalf of workers, including international cooperation (Silver 2003).

Against this backdrop, the EU Economic governance during the sovereign debt crisis (2010-14) have dramatically influenced the disempowerment of unions in policy-shaping to date, emphasising core-periphery inequalities (Rathgeb and Tassinari 2020). Such a process affected employment relations and labour organisations in particular, which were already in visible decline since at least the 1990s (Avdagic and Baccaro 2014). Adding to this, the fear of the technological replacement of jobs, and digitalisation-induced joblessness and worsening labour conditions, have added to the crises facing workers and organised labour.

Unfortunately, the many short-term crises have led to a lack of adequate engagement with the realities of the environmental crises, which has largely been missing amongst most trade unions and trade union confederations – with notable recent exceptions (Kalt 2021; Thomas 2021; Thomas and Doerflinger 2020; Barca 2012, 2019; Clarke and Lipsig-Mummé 2020).

This is in part due to the 'ecomodernist' or 'technological fix' narrative and orientation of many states when it comes to the environmental crises, which many trade unions have taken up as well as the difficulty of going against the postwar 'growth coalition' and the relative ease which the ecomodernist 'narrative of climate delay' provides in the face of the existential overwhelm (Barca 2019; Kreinin 2020, 2021; White 2019; Lamb et al 2020).

The 'technological optimist', 'ecomodernist' or 'ecological modernisation' discourses suggest that technology alone will be able to counteract the environmental crises without the need to limit economic growth, production and consumption, often combined with 'fossil fuel solutionist' discourses, which suggest for example that fossil gas can be a pathway to sustainability (Lamb et al 2020).

Some workers' institutions, like the ETUI, have already begun to engage more deeply with the realities of environmental science, and to critique and move away from ecomodernist narratives of climate delay. The ETUI has done much work on the topic of providing welfare within planetary boundaries, in other words on post-growth welfare states, leading the way in basing trade union policy advice and solutions on sound environmental science (ETUI 2021; Laurent 2021).

As the European Environmental Agency (EEA 2021) recently reported, decoupling of emissions from economic growth and production at a scale and speed necessary to avoid civilisational collapse in the next century has not been observed and is now considered unlikely – especially due to the harmful effects of green technological solutions on biodiversity, the slow burning threat to human life, and the fact that high energy-return-on-investment sources of fossil fuels have largely been exploited, making economic growth and available fossil fuels more and more environmentally costly (Haberl et al 2020; Hickel et al 2021; Jackson 2016; Keyßer and Lenzen 2021; Wiedmann et al 2020).

Fig. 1: Relative change in main global economic and environmental indicators from 1970 to 2018

Global GHG emissions — Material Footprint — Global GDP
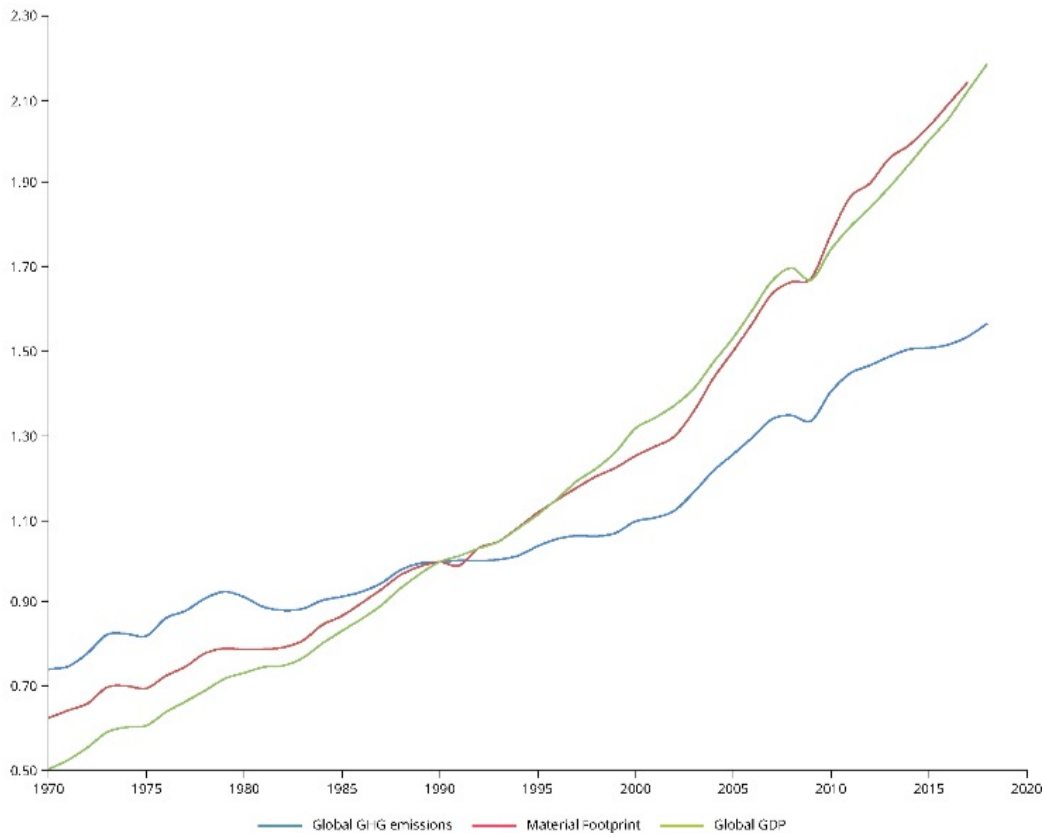
Source: EEA 2021

This is a problem, since according to the most up-to-date environmental research, we need to dramatically decrease production in the 2020s in line with the need to reduce environmental impacts (Keyßer and Lenzen 2021).

In the next section we will focus on how the environmental crises affect and interact with the crises of work.

2.1.2 The environmental and social crises of work

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[L]abour without energy is a corpse, while capital without energy is a sculpture.

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The crisis of work entails the lack of 'good jobs' in the work society (Rodrik and Stantcheva 2021), job polarisation and wage polarisation (Goos et al 2014; Peugny 2019), the environmental impact of work (Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020; Frey 2019), and the effects of work itself for societal welfare and human liberty (Fellner 2017; Frayne 2015; Graeber 2018).

The environmental crises directly impact workers and workers' organisations as citizens, but also – because of the environmental crises themselves, as well as the necessary action required – through the world of work (Kreinin and Aigner 2021). Work can be considered the 'mediating process' between environment and society (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010; Barca 2012), and although different economic sectors have different impacts on the environment, production and work must decrease overall if societies are serious about societal commitments to the Paris Agreement (Littig 2018; Knight and Schor 2014; Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020). What work is produced, for whom, and how, have key implications for future societal welfare. A socio-ecological transformation to a new sustainable system, with reduced production and work, focusing on human well-being with reduced material throughput, sufficient and a more efficient provisioning of welfare, is urgently required (Brand and Wissen 2017; Kreinin 2021).

Schnaiberg's (1980) famous 'treadmill of production' theory explained the central mechanism of the growth-based expanding economy, where more and more energy in the form of fossil fuels is required to increase productivity, and workers must run ever faster to produce more. Increasing societal consumption is then necessary to keep up with production and keep unemployment at bay, while advertisement and marketing create new wants

and keep up consumption. Productivity growth and consumption growth in the postwar era ushered in increases in consumption, leading to needed material benefits for materially deprived workers, as well as a new era of welfare thanks to increasing revenues for the state. However, this model is unsustainable in the 2020s. Severe material deprivation amongst the poorest in the Global North (vis-a-vis the overconsumption of the average citizen) is rather due to inequality and the dysfunctional societal division of material resources, which more economic growth has failed to tackle since the 1980s (Hickel et al 2021; Keyßer and Lenzen 2021; Laurent 2021).

The 'productivity trap' at the heart of the treadmill economic system (Jackson and Victor 2008) has meant that states and labour organisations have pushed for more productivity to keep unemployment at bay, despite that in fact societies are already too productive. Productivity is closely related to energy use and materials use – rather than some abstract measure of technological improvement or innovation (Ayres and Warr 2009; Jackson and Victor 2008). Labour productivity increases in Germany and Italy in the 20th century, for example, were directly related to increased energy use per hour worked (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 1998; Fischer-Kowalski and Haas 2016; Kreinin and Aigner 2021). Steve Keen has rightfully criticised economists for failing to understand that 'labour without energy is a corpse, while capital without energy is a sculpture' (Keen et al 2019).

Recent estimates suggest that to stay within the Paris Agreement level of emissions, European countries must drastically reduce working times. However, it is important to avoid rebound effects in climate-harmful leisure activities, such as flying on holiday.

This suggests that a wider societal and cultural change is required in combination with a reduction in production and working hours (Antal 2014; Antal et al 2020; Buhl and Acosta Fernandez 2016; Frey 2019; Gerold and Nocker 2018; Knight et al 2013; Nässén and Larsson 2015; Schor 2005). Figure 2 shows the actual vs target full-time working weeks on a macro level for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average – as well as for the UK, Sweden and Germany – required to stay within the Paris Agreement (Frey 2019).

While the move to less harmful sectors is needed, it is clear that working time reduction must be a part of sustainability activities. A robust system of welfare provisioning, within planetary boundaries and outside the treadmill economic system, is required to ensure that it is not those members of society, already breaking at the yoke of neoliberal policies, that suffer the brunt of the effects of the needed societal transformation – whether that happens by design or disaster.

Fig. 2: Actual vs target full-time working weeks

Source: (Frey 2019, 6)

Since the late 1970s/1980s and the neoliberal turn, wages have been decoupled from productivity growth in many parts of the world, as increasing economic growth and material consumption in the Global North has failed to add to human welfare, despite huge increases in material consumption (Rezai and Stagl 2016; O'Neill et al 2018; Kreinin and Aigner 2021). This is because both the created wealth as well as the consumption has been very unequally divided. Moreover, increasing consumption has been used to satisfy the ever-higher consumption of positional goods by the already well-off in society, not to meet welfare needs and provide security for the materially poor (O'Neill 2018). Although the environmental crises highlight the need to transform work, the primacy of work and the societal position of work make it difficult to challenge and transform work (Barca 2019; Kreinin and Latif 2022). Work provides not only the material basis for a good life in our 'work society' (Weeks 2011), but also meaning, identity and social status, which make it difficult to challenge, even in the face of existential threats (Hansen 2019; Kreinin and Latif 2022; Fellner 2017). Work, much like GDP growth,

is not only a phenomenon, but also part of societal institutions, and an ideology (Haapanen and Tapio 2016; Kreinin and Aigner 2021). In the 'work society', work that is societally prestigious and well-paid is often not the work that is socially or environmentally beneficial, and often even undermines social and environmental sustainability.

The postwar period has been called the golden age of capitalism, or the golden age of trade unions, yet the work performed by workers in Fordist/Taylorist mass production – justified and compensated by mass consumption – was often mind-numbing, alienating, psychologically damaging, and dehumanising to those performing it (Dassbach 1991; Gardell 1976; Shepard 1970). The factory provided the stage for workers' movements and unionisation, social contact and many positive things. Yet a critical reappraisal of work, as well as discussions around the transformation of work, especially around trade unions, must move away from nostalgia-induced simple discourses of 'praising work' towards 'transforming work' and even limiting work, for human autonomy and liberty as well as the environment (Komlosy 2008; Keil and Kreinin 2022). David Graeber's (2008) 'bullshit work' refers to widely accepted yet socially useless (self-proclaimed) and damaging work undertaken by workers in the post-Fordist era, due to society's preoccupation with the morality of work, rather than the benefits that work produces for the employer, employee or society.

A discussion around which types of work are needed for society, if many forms of work are environmentally and socially damaging, must also include the real, important and often hidden role that reproductive work and care work has played and continues to play in providing the basis for so-called productive or paid work (Barca 2020; Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010; Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020).

The labour movement and workers' organisations in Europe have to contend with the reality that increasing European welfare in the postwar period especially (but already starting in the early industrial period) was built on the extreme exploitation of labour in the Global South. This huge drain and flow of wealth from the Global South to the Global North has totalled around $62 trillion since the 1960s, or $152 trillion (constant 2011 US Dollars) when also calculating lost growth (Hickel et al 2021b).

The postwar or Fordist production method, as part of the 'treadmill of production' economic system (Schnaiberg 1980) not only laid the foundation for the increasing environmental crises, but was also based on continuing labour exploitation in the colonies of Europe, which provided the cheap raw materials, labour and environmental sinks for increasing production in the European (and American) heartlands (Brand and Wissen 2012, 2021).

The post-war social contract that enabled European workers to benefit from increasing production via their increased consumption was indeed a concession made to a small part of the global population (Silver 2003). 'One could cut in several-hundred-million workers and still make the system profitable. But if one cut in several billion Third World workers, there would be nothing left for further capital accumulation' (Wallerstein 1995, 25, cited in Silver 2003, 21). The post-war social contract that enabled European welfare enabled workers in the Global North to live 'the imperial mode of living' that had been reserved for the upper classes before mass production and mass consumption (Brand and Wissen 2012, 2021).

While the 'imperial mode of living' for a few workers in the Global North was 'facilitated by the possibility of externalising socio-ecological costs in space and time', the failure of the promise of the imperial mode of living for all workers also lays the groundwork for establishing a new 'solidary mode of living' in line with environmental science (Wissen and Brand 2021). It was arguably this 'split between the discursive promises that were made to globalize mass consumption American-style and the inability to do so profitably' that swung 'the pendulum back toward global self-regulating markets' starting in the late 1970s (Silver 2003, 21). The promise of lifestyles of the 'imperial mode of living' for everyone was not achieved, not even in the Global North, let alone the world (Silver 2003). Indeed, these promises cannot be achieved, on a finite planet (Wiedmann 2020).

While this is a stark reality to contend with, it also promises new forms of organisation and liberation. A good life for all within planetary boundaries is possible, and we can meet the welfare needs of everyone, but not luxury lifestyles or the overconsumption of positional goods by a select few (O'Neill et al 2019). Transforming our economies and societies in line with environmental and social needs requires new forms of worker organising and solidarity, past narrow exclusionary boundary-drawing and national chauvinism.

2.1.3 Digitalisation and the future of work

In 2011, the president of the German Academy of Science introduced the term Industry 4.0 (I4.0) for the first time (Schuh at al 2017). Although such an expression is usually adopted to describe the most recent advancements of ICT applications in manufacturing processes, global leaders and observers have been arguing that we are currently facing a 'fourth industrial revolution' (Schwab 2016).

Following the steam and electric power which have characterised the first two revolutions, I4.0 builds on the innovations brought by the use of computers and robotics in the second half of the 20th century. In a few words, AI-driven technologies such as wearable devices, 3D printing and smart industrial robots are now able to merge with humans, constituting a blended workforce, with potential applications to all sectors and contexts.

It is not among the purposes of this report to discuss whether the claim of the rise of a new industrial revolution is justified or not. Given the great hype generated by I4.0, a lively academic debate is currently ongoing, with many scholars expressing sceptical views on such a definition (Barley 2020; Briken et al 2017). However, what we will focus on here instead is an analysis of how the most recent ICT applications are impacting workplaces, and how such developments are shaping the policy debate about the future of work.

In a recent FEPS SAMAK report (Nogarede and Støstad 2020), the authors summarised the main topics of discussion for a progressive agenda,

namely technological determinism, destruction and polarisation of jobs due to automation, opaque transparency of algorithmic decision-making and gender equality.

Recent empirical research on the impact on I4.0 in the automotive sector suggests that the adoption of a hard-technological approach to control and automate manufacturing processes can result in a loss of power, influence and learning opportunities for workers and unions. These dynamics can eventually lead to inequalities among workers, even between different teams in the same company (Butollo, Jürgens and Krzywdzinski 2018; Moro et al 2019).

Workers who experience a reduction of autonomy and control over work organisation often face worse working conditions too, as further evidence from the gig economy or logistic warehouse contexts clearly shows (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014; Delfanti 2020). In particular, digital tools are used to develop algorithmic management structures which have a threefold function: 1) extracting workers' knowledge through digital monitoring and then fragmenting work tasks in simple and repetitive actions (also to be partly automated); 2) reducing operating cost by outsourcing specific tasks to precarious workers; 3) augmenting managerial control by presenting algorithms as objective tools which cannot be objected to.

Critical research in the field has been traditionally inspired by Labour Process Theory (LPT, Braverman 1974), the most recent accounts of which advance the position that automation-related deskilling is not an inevitable outcome of contemporary capitalism (Briken et al 2017). In this regard, Hirsch-Kreinsen (2016) presents two scenarios for I4.0: a pessimistic perspective which foresees more employee surveillance, more standardised and short-cycle work, eventually determining a poorer quality of working life; and an optimistic perspective which rather emphasises the opportunities enabled by ICT and robotisation to empower operators with decentralised planning and control.

Against this backdrop, workplace politics is crucial to determining the impact of new technologies on work organisation and working conditions. Understanding the workplace as a contested terrain (Boreham 2004) allows workers and unions to counterbalance a typical employer narrative which considers new technologies as inherently beneficial tools that liberate workers and modernise the workplace (Delfanti 2020).

As shown by the Eurofound and ILO (2017), ICT's adoption at work has dramatically increased in the last 20 years, determining mixed effects especially on working time and work-life balance. These are considered to be the most pressing issues to be negotiated in relation to new technologies, according to worker representatives across Europe (Voss and Riede 2018). As shown in Figure 3, although the two topics are often discussed in information and consultation committees, collective bargaining agreements are not so common and there are significant differences between countries.

Fig. 3: Workers' participation: work-life balance and digitalisation

■ Not addressed
■ Yes, within union organisation
■ Yes, company agreement
■ Don't know
■ Yes, information and consultation
■ Yes, sectoral collective agreement
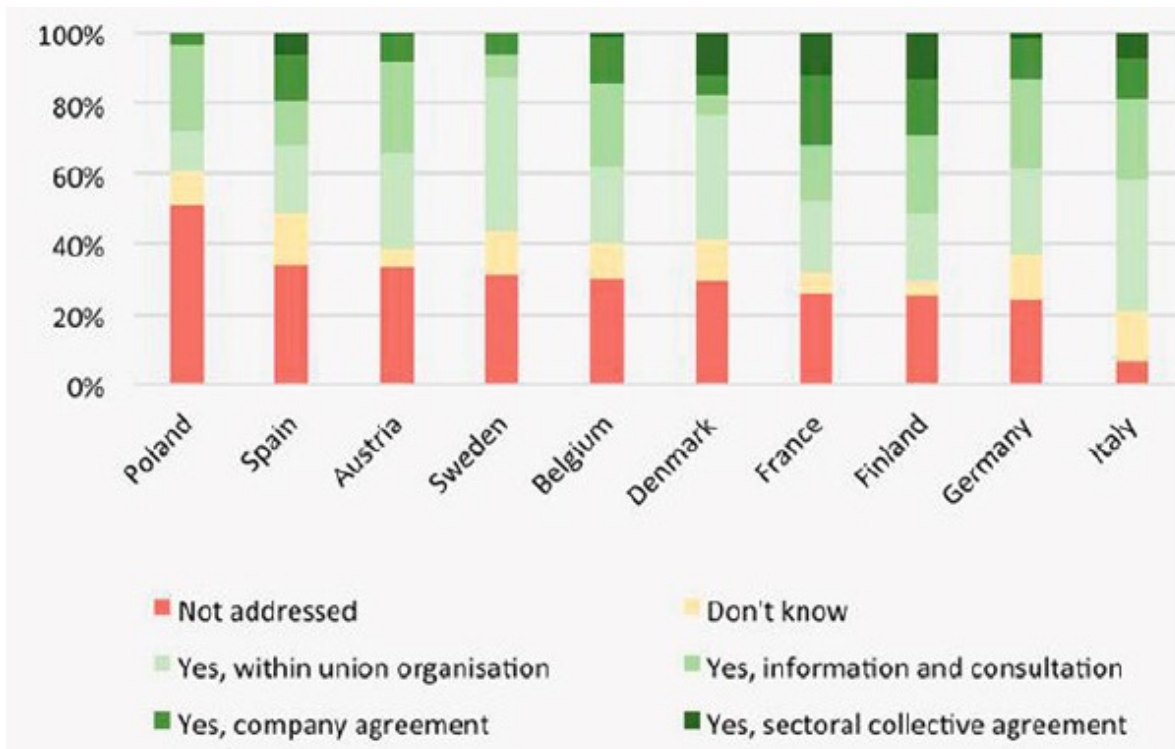
Source: Voss and Riede 2018

Considering the likely increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies in our daily lives, trade unions and policy makers have a duty to design policies that will guarantee a fair future to all citizens.

2.2 Trade unions and the multiple crises

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In scholarly and political debates on transformation towards sustainability or along social-ecological lines, employees and trade unions are hardly ever mentioned.

The latter still largely represent a perspective that could be summarised as 'jobs versus environment' and formulate their environmental strategies within the confines of ecological modernization, if indeed at all – i.e. they do not question the orientation towards growth, capitalist power and production relations or a destructive societal nature relations.

It was strong trade unions who won historical achievements for large parts of the population, but these achievements simultaneously deepened the problematic aspects of a mode of production and living which we call the 'imperial mode of living'. This antinomy needs to be considered and dealt with politically.

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(Brand and Niedermoser 2019, 173)

The labour movement has historically been the most vital organised manifestation of popular power. It is arguably responsible for achieving higher levels of societal emancipation than any other movement (Hampton 2015; Berberoglu 2019); therefore organised labour not only has a role to play, but also has a key responsibility, in the multiple crises facing society.

As well as facing a fundamental threat to human civilisations and societal welfare, societies are already facing multiple other social crises. As explained, workers' movements have been crucial to reaching social goals and raising societal welfare, including the living wage, better working conditions, the 40-hour week and working time reduction, since industrialisation (Berberoglu 2019; Hampton 2015). However, this has been based on the 'treadmill of production' system (Schnaiberg 1980), with huge externalised environmental costs (Barca 2012).

As explained previously, trade unions and workers' movements in Europe and elsewhere have moreover

been struggling since the neoliberal turn in the 1970s and 1980s (Silver 2003; Hyman 2001). Increasing financialisation, globalisation, and inequality since the late 1970s and early 1980s has gone hand in hand with the decline of trade unions and union density in most European countries (Peters 2011). While capital and businesses have become hypermobile thanks to increasingly liberalised capital markets, states and labour have not (Silver 2003). The ability of capital to play workers against each other in different countries has arguably created a race to the bottom (Tilly 1995), while states have been severely weakened in their ability to act, or defend welfare and workers (Bieler 2012; Blyton et al 2001; French 2018). This has led to a hollowing out of the middle classes in many European countries, as well as the rise of the far right and other social ills (Rodrik 2020). As Dani Rodrik and Stefanie Stantcheva explain: 'One of the fundamental problems of contemporary capitalism is its failure to produce adequate numbers of good jobs' for societal welfare (Rodrik and Stantcheva 2021). Many jobs and workplaces are plagued by long and increasing working hours,

and working conditions that are detrimental to health (directly, or through for example the health effects of stress and sitting behind a desk), as well as physically damaging (Kreinin and Latif 2022; Kreinin and Aigner 2021).

Unfortunately, the environmental crises, including climate change, have largely been overlooked in labour studies and employment relations, until recently – with the exception of environmental labour studies at the fringes of labour research (Goods 2017; Brand and Niedermoser 2019; Keil and Kreinin 2022; Kreinin 2021). Nevertheless, organised labour's role in promoting the treadmill system – both as agents in the work process of production and as agents of the 'growth coalition' promoting productivity increases – makes their analysis of key importance (Keil and Kreinin 2021). As key 'treadmill actors', organised labour could potentially slow down or even overturn the treadmill (Obach 2004; Schnaiberg 1980). Yet this would require political organisation, the politicisation of the environmental crises, political will, the abandonment of climate delay discourses, and importantly also international solidarity and cooperation.

As explained above, neoliberalism has made the place of trade unions, as well as their ability to take action, increasingly difficult. While some unions in wealthier countries have been somewhat successful in defending the aims, wages and working conditions of their members, this has usually happened by making increasingly worse deals with employers, and setting boundaries around their members vis-a-vis subcontracted workers with worse pay and work conditions, or workers in other countries (Silver 2003). One example of such 'successful' business unionism focusing on members' pay and conditions has been IGBCE in Germany. It has accepted increasingly worse conditions and pay for non-unionised workers with non-standard contracts and insecure working conditions, in a Faustian deal with employers for better conditions for a shrinking IGBCE membership with standard contracts and security (Keil and Kreinin 2022). Such boundary-setting amongst unions and workers' organisations has only divided the labour movement and in fact led to slowly worsening working conditions for all

(Silver 2003). It has also meant that in many cases trade unions have abandoned the most vulnerable.

Other unions, including IG Metall, have sought to actively recruit informal workers and have refused to make similar deals – in the case of IG Metall, even fighting across state borders and for example recruiting automobile workers in Hungary (Fichter 2018). It has long been suggested that the re-politicisation of welfare and workers' struggles, as well as international solidarity, are key elements of the revitalisation of trade unions and workers movements – especially when it comes to young workers (Dufour-Poirier and Laroche 2015; Hamann and Kelly 2004; Tapia and Turner 2018). Although there is a debate around whether 'only a global labor movement is up to the task of effectively challenging global organizations and institutions' or 'a handful of powerful states are the most strategic targets for labor movements' (Silver 2003, 10), strategies that do both go hand in hand in a globalised world. Certainly, labour and workers' movements must fight against chauvinist tendencies to sacrifice international solidarity and the cause of liberation abroad for short-term solutions or deals.

As well as struggling to face the many simultaneous short- and long-term crises confronting workers and society, many trade unions across the continent have been focused on the control of workplaces, rather than workers themselves. This is built on the industrial model, whereby an individual joined a career or an individual factory as an apprentice and rarely left it before retirement. Where that model still holds – within the public sector where careers such as teaching or medicine are maintained throughout a working life – and in places or sectors of the economy where there is little movement between workplaces, such as the Jaguar-Land Rover factories in the West Midlands in the UK, where other car factories have closed, the trade union movement is still relatively strong. But where it does not, in particular in the white-collar professions and in non-graduate white-collar work such as call centres, where workers move between workplaces and employers relatively frequently, the trade union movement has absolutely collapsed.

The new challenges brought by the environmental crises and changing work forms are striking unions even in traditional union strongholds. The nature of tasks is changing due to new technologies' implementation, which progressively require different sets of skills and thus the need for training to avoid the threat of a jobs polarisation. New management practices, made possible by algorithms and big data analytics, are raising concerns with regards to job quality and a potential deterioration of democracy at work; especially in the gig economy, where unions are fragmented and workers are mostly precarious.

However, trade unions have also been showing remarkable efforts to innovate advocacy/recruiting practices through social platforms (Houghton and Hodder 2021) and research the effects of new technologies (for example collaborations with academic institutions) to be able to negotiate with employers on a stronger position (Voss and Riede 2018). Several agreements have been signed over the years, most recently the European Social Partners Framework Agreement on Digitalisation (BusinessEurope et al 2020) which regulates four main macro issues, namely work organisation, work content and skills, working conditions, and work relations.

2.2.1 Trade unions and the environment

Although some unions have taken up the mantle of organised labour for struggles for better outcomes for workers and society at large, others have decided to side with business and the short-term interests of a narrow (and declining) group of members, against wider societal and environmental interests (Barca 2014; Felli 2014; Jakopovich 2009). The neoliberal assault on workers' rights and conditions, general social welfare system decline, and the decline in trade union organising, have contributed to the 'jobs blackmail' organisation of work in society, and paved the way for the current service-style 'business unionist' model (Jakopovich 2009; Hyman 2001).

Researchers in environmental labour studies, such as Stefania Barca (2012, 61), have rightfully criticised trade unions for not addressing broader societal struggles, and failing to question 'the political ecology of industrial production and pollution in society' both locally and globally.

New broad alliances are considered key for instituting the post-growth welfare state and the needed social-ecological transformation of work, society and economy – in line with environmental science, and the necessity to reduce overall levels of production and consumption (Hampton 2013; Barca and Leonardi 2018). Globally, there are more and more examples of such alliances – for example through the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy[1] group in the UK, as well as different Just Transition initiatives, including the Just Transition Partnership.[2]

Under pressure from all sides, the role of bureaucracy and union co-optation has been strengthened, making unions a de-politicised 'service provider'. This has meant that the wider project of labour organising, workers' emancipation itself, and larger questions about meaningful work and the role of work in society have largely been abandoned (Barca 2014; Barca and Leonardi 2018; Hampton 2015; Kreinin 2021). Yet these questions were key to the labour movement of the early 20th century, which looked beyond the factory wall, to consider what was important for a 'good life for all', community welfare, and wider questions about workers' emancipation, agency, and autonomy (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014).

For new broad alliances to be possible and effective, many researchers suggest that 'social movement unionism' must again emerge, against the more narrow, own-member-only focus of 'business unionism' which has increasingly become the norm since neoliberal revolution (Hyman 2001; Eimer 1999; Felli 2014; Gould, Lewis et al 2004; Stevis and Felli 2015; Taplin 1990; Young et al 2011). As Hyman explains 'to defend the "European social model"', common and concerted action at European level 'is essential' (Hyman 2005, 9).

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1   https://unionsforenergydemocracy.org
2   https://foe.scot/resource/just-transition-partnership-manifesto/

The environmental crises and the crisis of neoliberalisation require politicisation, as there are no 'win-win' benefits: it is impossible to avoid Hothouse Earth while simultaneously expanding the 'treadmill of production' economic system. We need systemic change, since the interrelated multiple crises challenge the current organisation of welfare in society all the way down (Hampton 2015). The needed changes necessarily entail conflict; this is difficult for unions who are already in a defensive position. The defensive position of unions has disabled organised labour from facing the contradictions and conflicts inherent in the current neoliberal organisation of welfare and work (Jakopovich 2009; Mason and Morter 1998). The strategy of narrow boundary-setting has not even achieved the minimal social goals that unions have hoped for, as workers continue to lose ground, security and jobs, and continue to be subjected to restructuring.

On the other hand, the environmental crises offer unions and organised labour a new sense of purpose. Building solidarity with and co-operating with social and environmental movements on the ground, especially on the local level, could help revitalise unions and especially attract young members (Fairbrother 2010). This, however, entails both a significant level of politicisation, wider solidarity-building, and the abandonment of the perks of exclusionary boundary-setting. Unions have to first confront their wish to narrowly protect jobs and the interests of their members – and set their sights on broader, wider, and long-term goals.

As authors in environmental labour studies have suggested (eg Jakopovich 2009; Mason and Mortar 1998), unions have been put in an antagonistic position with some social movements because of job insecurity, the so-called 'jobs blackmail' (Barca and Leonardi 2016); however, job insecurity, precarisation, flexibilisation, and job loss are core parts of the insecurities of neoliberal organisation of work in society. Destroying the environment in the service of global capital accumulation will conversely still fail to bring back the secure employment conditions of the Fordist era. Authors like Jakopovich (2009) have argued that the major goal of labour-environmental co-operation must focus on creating a broad anti-neoliberal alliance, to challenge both the hyper-exploitation of workers and social and environmental destruction.

2.2.2 Different types of union orientation towards the environment

Trade unions are not unitary, but rather heterogeneous agents. Union repertoires of action, orientation, and narratives are based on a variety of factors, including the country they are based in, the sectors they organise, the internal history of the union, as well as the leading actors and agents within the unions, amongst others (Price 2019; Keil and Kreinin 2022). Unions are also internally divided arenas for different ideas and orientations.

Different authors in environmental labour studies have found different ways of categorising unions, based on their social as well as environmental orientation. Hyman (2001) famously divided trade unions along the triad of market, state, or class/society orientation. Hampton (2015) has built on this, to further divide unions according to their environmental orientation: as 'neoliberal' (oriented towards the market and market climate-delay solutions to the environmental crises); 'ecological modernisation' (oriented towards the state and technologically optimistic climate-delay solutions to the environmental crises); and 'Marxist political economy/social-ecological transformation' (Kreinin 2020) framing (oriented towards class and society, critical of the underlying crises of the treadmill economic system causing the environmental crises) (Hampton 2015; see also Hampton 2018).

Similarly, Räthzel and Uzzell (2011) have classified the discourses of different international trade unions, based on their short- or long-term vision as well as level of social context included. They classify four categories: 'technological fix'; 'social transformation'; 'mutual interests'; and 'social movement' union climate discourses.

Hampton's (2015) 'market/neoliberal' type of climate discourse overlaps with Räthzel and Uzzell's (2011) 'technological fix' discourse, while the 'state/ecological modernisation' discourse includes elements of 'technological fix', 'social transformation' and 'mutual interest' in Räthzel and Uzzell's typology. Hampton's 'Marxist/class' (or 'social-ecological transformation') (Kreinin 2020) orientation largely aligns with Räthzel and Uzzell's 'social movement' type of union climate discourse.

Many environmental labour researchers have found the 'ecological modernisation' or 'ecomodernist' narrative and orientation towards the environmental crises to be the most prominent amongst trade unions (eg Hampton 2015, 2018; Barca 2012, 2019; Price 2019; Kreinin 2020, 2021). The ecological modernisation narrative is fundamentally a narrative of 'climate delay' (Lamb et al 2020). This narrative focuses on the promise of 'green growth' and the decoupling of environmental impacts thanks to technological solutions, ignoring environmental science and the need to avoid Hothouse Earth, the environmental and biodiversity impacts of many green industries and technologies (Hickel and Kallis 2019; Jackson and Victor 2019; Keyßer and Lenzen 2021), and the reality that European economies have in fact been recoupling since 2008 (Naqvi 2021).

Trade unions have promoted the narrative of ecomodernism about the environmental crises partly because it is the narrative of business, because taking action requires politicisation, and because ecomodernism promises win-win solutions (even if impossible) which are easier to face in the weakened position of unions in society (Barca 2012, 2019). Due to the 'growth coalition' (Schnaiberg 1980), this narrative has also been promoted by states as well as businesses and supranational organisations (eg EC 2019; World Bank 2019, 2021; ITUC 2017) despite long-standing scientific critique (eg Meadows et al 1972; Schnaiberg 1980; Ayres et al 2001; Ayres and Warr 2009; EEA 2018, 2021; Spash 2007; Turner 2008, 2014).

Fewer unions follow the business-focused climate orientation (Hampton 2015). According to this 'climate delay' narrative of the environmental crises (Lamb et al 2020), market solutions are enough to face environmental catastrophe. Amongst trade unions, this narrative includes unions mirroring employer concerns and support for climate-harmful policies in the name of jobs, or competitiveness (national, local or sectoral), or profitability and carbon leakage, often also employing national-chauvinist boundary-setting (Hampton 2015). Thomas and Doerflinger (2020) find that unions oriented towards business unionism employing the 'neoliberal' environment orientation are more likely to outright 'oppose' as well as 'hedge' (delay) decarbonisation efforts.

Most authors in the field of environmental labour studies agree that sectoral interests – the so-called 'occupational positionality' – play a major role in trade union approaches to the environment (eg Price 2019; Kalt 2021). While unions in more fossil-intensive and environmentally harmful industries have had a more difficult time in facing the environmental crises, there are also differences in union approaches to the environmental crises within environmentally harmful sectors (eg Kreinin 2021).

Unfortunately very few unions currently actively promote a 'social-ecological transformation' framing of the environmental crises, in line with environmental science, although this narrative is increasingly prevalent within internal union debates, especially amongst grassroots members organising for the environment, rather than union management (Keil and Kreinin 2022). The difficulties of taking up social-ecological transformation-oriented positions, in line with environmental research, can be explained by the strength of the societal 'growth coalition' in favour of the 'treadmill of production' system (Gould et al 2004). Another reason why social-ecological transformation discourses, and necessary action, has been missing amongst trade unions is the lack of a common positive vision of a future beyond the 'treadmill of production' system, where workers' welfare is ensured (Keil and Kreinin 2022; Kreinin 2021).

It has become somewhat of a fashion to refer to Fredric Jameson's (1994) famous quip that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism', yet in the neoliberal era of TINA, globalisation, 'the end of history', and 'capitalism realism' (Fisher 2009) it is hard to imagine alternatives. As Beverly Silver (2003, 16) laments, what neoliberalism and globalisation have achieved 'more than anything else' is to destroy a century-old belief and hope in worker power, and 'to create a discursive environment that has dramatically deflated popular political moral and the willingness to struggle for change'. Although 'such shifts in workers' beliefs partly mirror shifts in structural and associational bargaining power', they also 'play a role of their own in [the] dynamics of labour movements' (Silver 2003, 16).

Damian White (2019) explains that trade unions and labour have thus partially been torn between the climate-delay discourses of ecomodernist easy win-win solutions, on the one hand, and the climate-delay discourses of apocalypse and passive surrender, on the other, while suggesting that it does not have to be this way: 'if we wish to move towards a just transition, we need political imaginaries that can take us beyond the technocratic politics of the good Anthropocene and the melancholic paralysis offered by the it's-too-late-o-cene' (White 2019, 198).

There are trade union narratives based on a strong grasp of environmental science and the reality that the 'treadmill of production' economic system must be tamed for the long-term welfare of human societies. The 'social-ecological contract' concept for a post-growth economy put forward by the ETUI is one such example (ETUI 2021). The narrative focus of sufficiency as security – uniting the struggles of inequality and neoliberalisation, the crises of work, and the ecological crises – refocuses the imagination of the possibilities of a different, socially-ecologically sustainable system. It furthermore provides a new starting point for common positive visions of the future.

In the final section of this report, we will highlight different trade union policies and actions that are in line with these goals, as well as providing the basis for a new post-growth welfare state and economy in line with Earth's carrying capacity.

2.3 A brief overview of the aviation sector, 'The most extreme example of profit driven, neoliberal capitalism[3]

The creation of a single European aviation market in the late 1980s marked the start of a new era of industrial relations in the sector, determining on the one hand the appearance of low-fare airlines (LFAs, for example Ryanair, easyJet, Wizz Air) which have gradually disrupted the market, and on the other hand a shift in regulatory authority from the nation state to the supranational institutions of the EU.

During the Europeanisation process following the Maastricht Treaty, market integration was not fully accompanied by clear and comprehensive social policy measures: consequently, the low fare airlines, in particular, could take advantage of the unclear dynamics between national and European sovereignty to develop business practices often deemed illegitimate (Harvey and Turnbull 2015).

Against this backdrop, trade unions across Europe, which traditionally rooted their power in a close relationship with their national flag-carrier airline(s), found themselves unable to guarantee the same level of protection to their members and workers overall. According to Mendoça (2020), the current EU regulatory framework is prone to 'institutional avoidance'.

However, if we look at some of the structural characteristics of the industry, aviation workers do hold a considerable amount of bargaining power: union density is overall high and the supply of skilled labour is highly regulated (Harvey and Turnbull 2012). Given that the product is not replaceable, strike actions can cause significant economic losses to airlines, which cannot get back any lost flights.

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3   Interviewee from PCS union. June 2021.

Although workers' structural power in the industry may suggest that employers are keen to secure unions' consent, especially in co-ordinated market economies where institutional boundaries foster co-operation, other business-related factors push against that, leading to inconsistent HR policies. For instance, labour accounts for around one third of total operating costs and is one of the few expenses that can be cut to gain competitiveness. This frequently leads to confrontational approaches (Turnbull et al 2004).

In this regard, Turnbull et al (2004) observed that there is a positive correlation between demand for flights and economic growth, even though the former usually grows at a much faster rate than the latter. This discrepancy is often the cause of conflicts as while at the peak of business activities employee demands are on the rise, employers are predicting a decline in bookings and are therefore less likely to accommodate workers' requests. Notably, when airlines undertake cost-reduction strategies it more often affects female workers, who hold more limited structural power from their occupation when compared to their male colleagues (Harvey et al 2019).

In a recent paper analysing union responses to Ryanair's cost-cutting strategies in Portugal, Mendoça (2020) shows that the combination of local union-social movements' collective protests with transnational unions' alliances can be effective in overcoming the power of the LFAs and protect precarious workers.

However, more research is needed to identify new opportunities and best practices that unions can deploy at the national and transnational level. This is particularly relevant for the challenges posed by both the digital and environmental transitions, which are putting unions in a difficult position to defend jobs and working conditions (Briken and Taylor 2018), whilst also being a central actor in driving change.

Special attention will be dedicated to the environmental crisis, which probably represents one of the main challenges unions are facing today in the aviation sector. Our analysis will depart from Rätzhel and Uzzell's (2011) review of the four discourses adopted by trade unionists to frame the conflicting relationship between jobs and the environment ('technological fix' discourse; 'social transformation' discourse; 'mutual interests' discourse; 'social movement' discourse) and Hampton's (2015) three discourses ('neoliberal political economy'; 'ecological modernisation'; and 'Marxist political economy') to then advance potential innovative solutions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Data collection methods

In the current section, we present the main findings of this report based on four expert semi-structured interviews (Bogner et al 2009), carried out (and audio-recorded) via Zoom between May and July 2021, with trade union leaders from Austria (VIDA), Belgium (ACV-CSC), the UK (Public and Commercial Services Union – PCS) and Germany (IG Metall).

Interviewees have been selected on the basis of their expertise in the aviation sector and sectoral/ regional leadership role within their unions. The participant from Austria holds a seat within the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) too.

Although our sample cannot be considered statistically representative of union leaderships across Europe, it allowed us to collect data from leaders representing different core constituencies in different countries.

The audio files were subsequently transcribed and subjected to content analysis (Aberbach and Rockman 2002).

The aim of the interviews was to compare trade unionists' understanding of the challenges outlined above, to be considered within their own national and European dimensions. In this regard, participants were first asked to identify the most pressing priorities for their unions overall, immediately allowing us to understand the extent to which our theoretical lenses were in line with those of the interviewees.

The conversation then moved towards how these challenges have been affecting the aviation sector specifically, highlighting both main issues and best practices.

Special attention was given to the formation of a transnational network which had led to a European industrial action against Ryanair in 2018, and what kind of strategies unions should pursue to tackle the environmental impact of the industry.

Lastly, the interviews were complemented with secondary data obtained through online desk research about the 2018 Ryanair campaign (ACV-CSC 2018) and environmental groups active in the aviation sector, such as Stay Grounded (Stay Grounded 2020).

3.2 Presentation of the findings

In this section we will present the findings of the expert interviews undertaken with trade union officials organising in the aviation sector in the four European member states.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in our society was considered to be the main challenge that workers and trade unions are facing today. More in depth, the race to the bottom to gain competitiveness has 'normalised' the existence of the working poor, while the mantra to increase productivity at all costs often leads to workers' burnout and increased dissatisfaction with working conditions.

Against this backdrop, trade unions find it increasingly difficult to recruit new members within a fragmented workforce, which results in a limited capacity to undertake industrial actions at both the national and, especially, European level. Even though all the participants recognised the effort of European trade union bodies to foster cooperation, some frustration with a labour movement still too attached to national boundaries was firmly expressed.

Notably, the above-mentioned issues are all clearly affecting the aviation sector. Jobs like cabin crew operators, that used to guarantee a satisfactory income level until the early 2000s, are now subject to extensive social dumping pressures by LFAs. Furthermore, according to the German participant, even pilots have been recently experiencing similar conditions due to the precarity of their contracts (often classified as self-employed). Such poor conditions triggered the transnational strike at Ryanair in 2018, as we will see more in detail in the next section.

However, precarisation and low salaries are not the only concerns highlighted by the interviewees: the aviation union representative from ACV-CSC explained how employers are using digital technologies to measure airport workers' performances (ground handling services) and predict the exact number of people that are needed in a certain time-frame to reduce cost. Whereas in the past employees used to have some time of less intensive work during an eight-hour shift, recently zero-hours contracts are becoming increasingly common, through which workers are forced to be constantly productive. Given the rise of passengers in the last decades and the high work pace during peaks, airport workers have been experiencing considerable job intensification.

With regards to what unions are doing to address these issues, we registered two main strategies: union revitalisation within the workplace; and advocacy for common European rules. It is worth noting that while the latter was conceptualised in a similar fashion by all the trade union leaders we interviewed, the former revealed some ideological differences between unions, as well as diverging priorities according to local conditions and institutional contexts.

The most striking testimony was provided by the PCS unionist, who is very concerned about the partnership approach (Johnstone 2015) adopted by too many unions (especially leaderships) in engaging with employers. In particular, the interviewee believes that unions need to collaborate much more with social/environmental organisations such as Stay Grounded and Fridays for Future, in order to advance societal rights rather than particularistic ones, for the long-term welfare of workers and societies. The pandemic is incentivising unions to be even more corporatistic, focusing on immediate actions to protect jobs rather than thinking in the long term, the participant pointed out.

Such views are partly in contrast with those expressed by the interviewee from Austria (and ETF). For instance, according to the trade unionist's opinion, some unions are too political and competitive among themselves to gain new members, undermining the labour movement overall. Moreover, the collaboration with Stay Grounded and other groups was described with less enthusiastic tones, highlighting that the dialogue with them, although important, is not always fruitful. These differences can be interpreted through the traditional more adversarial attitude of trade unions in Britain than that of unions in the German-speaking world (Hall and Soskice 2007).

Union internal restructuring was unanimously considered as a necessity but also deemed as extremely difficult to achieve. The German participant pointed out that unions should focus more on strengthening workplace communication channels – which in the German context is usually the realm of work councils – to gain more members and (consequently) power, which can be spent on lobbying institutions. Another best practice was provided by the Belgian interviewee, who explained that they are now providing training for new shop stewards in English too, in order to be both more inclusive with the highly international workforce in Belgium, and capable of undertaking transnational campaigns.

Concerning the latter strategy, all our participants agreed on the fact that there is the need for minimum and maximum floors regulating working time and other conditions to guarantee fair jobs in the aviation sector. Some regulations were recently introduced by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), which set a maximum number of hours that people can fly in Europe.

European airlines operate on a much more international dimension than unions do, usually easily overcoming worker resistance and national regulations to impose their own business model. However, under certain circumstances, unions showed that forcing LFAs to sign a collective agreement is not impossible, as we will see below.

3.3 Per aspera ad astra: the Ryanair European strike

In September 2017, the CEO of Ryanair, Micheal O'Leary, said that 'hell would have to freeze over before he would negotiate with trade unions' (The Guardian 2017). A few months later he had to recognise unions and a year after, Ryanair signed a number of collective agreements in various European countries (see ITF ETF 2018).

How did workers and unions make hell freeze over? How did more than 4,000 cabin crew from four European countries (Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and Italy) manage to unite and protest against the powerful airline?

The Ryanair case attracted great attention from media and industrial relations scholars (Mendoça 2020). What we will show here are examples of best practices unions can deploy to revitalise the labour movement and undertake transnational industrial actions.

The employment relations context at Ryanair reflects the business model of LFAs outlined in Section 2.3. In several countries, especially in Western Europe, the workforce is mostly composed of migrants from other European countries, traditionally not unionised and extremely fragmented. However, one exception to this was Portugal, where most workers were local and organised. In line with the rest of Europe, though, Portuguese employees were experiencing poor working conditions determined by the extensive use of zero-hours contracts and management's refusal to negotiate with unions and apply local labour law regulations and rights.

Protests and strikes coordinated by a local union started to erupt in Portugal, while in Belgium a sentence by the European Court of Justice ruled that flight attendants have to be hired with contracts under Belgian legislation. Ryanair's reaction was harsh: workers from all over Europe were asked to replace Portuguese employees and break the strike. As explained by the union representative from Belgium, such a request from the company triggered the formation of a European movement, with workers approaching unions to ask for clarifications about the legitimacy of Ryanair's behaviour.

A series of circumstances facilitated the development of a sense of solidarity among workers: the job is exactly the same wherever it is performed and all workers had no real connection with the specific country they were working in, as their contract was often under Irish or other foreign regulations. In addition, whereas language diversity is a frequent barrier in European integration, cabin crew workers can all speak English, making the creation of digital communication channels (WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages) to coordinate the movement relatively easy.

There were three main requests: 1) application of national legislation and negotiation of collective agreements; 2) subcontracted workers should have guaranteed the same conditions and benefits as their colleagues directly hired by Ryanair; 3) ensure the freedom of association and union recognition rights (ACV-CSC 2018).

When asked about union best practices that made it possible to organise Ryanair workers, the union representative from Belgium answered:

> *It's always the workers who, and it's my opinion, unions should support workers and give them the tools to organize themselves. And I think it's almost never that such a movement comes out of a union itself. We tried but it's workers who make the movement, not the unions. We have to help them but it's up to them, so the beginning sparkle was striking. [...] The European Union, ETF, they do a great job at lobbying at European level. But the focus of unionism and European Unionism should be to unite the workers, not to try to unite the national unions.*
>
> **(Interviewee from ACV-CSC, June 2021)**

As previously mentioned, some results consisting of recognition of national legislations and the signing of collective agreements were obtained following the industrial actions. However, there is a clear disparity between Western and Central Eastern European countries, with the latter still without any concrete advancements in the relationship with the airline (ITF ETF 2018). According to the participant from the ETF, more work needs to be done to enforce agreements and avoid Ryanair taking advantage of legislation loopholes.

Despite the fact that industrial relations issues still persist at Ryanair, the European workers' network showed that even when facing the most hostile employer at the transnational level, finding unity in diversity is possible and effective.

3.4 Discussion: trade unions and the multiple crises

In line with the authors' expectations, research findings support the assumption that trade unions should not be considered as a united block with homogeneous preferences, but rather heterogeneous agents with different country settings, different membership constellations, organising priorities, internal dynamics, political backdrops, internal union history, and so forth (eg Hyman 2001; Hampton 2015).

We observed different approaches with regards to unions' degree of politicisation in engaging with employers and grass-root movements, especially towards the environmental challenge.

In this regard, the interviewees acknowledged the historical difficulties for trade unions in addressing climate change without eventually adopting corporatist models of representation. Although there is much more awareness that change is needed, on the one hand participants' testimonies suggest that unions are still struggling to advance clearly defined strategies based on common shared priorities and objectives. On the other hand it is also clear that a diversity of trade union approaches towards dealing with the environment exist – from business-focused ecomodernist discourses to more radical approaches.

Looking again at Räthzel and Uzzel's (2011) four discourses for instance, the participant from PCS would fall under the 'social movement' discourse, while the unionist from Belgium expressed positions closer to the 'mutual interest' one, highlighting the importance of connecting aviation workers' interests with those of the communities living in the surroundings of airports.

On a different note, the interviewee from Germany (similar to the Austrian-ETF participant) focused the attention on technological ('technological fix discourse') aspects, explaining that within the union 'no one questions the electric transition in the automotive sector'. These narratives are rather in line with the more pro-business climate-delay discourses, which discount the immediate threat of the environmental crises.

In addition, it was pointed out that the international campaign 'There are no jobs on a dead planet' did not receive a lot of concrete support internally.

In a paper, Erne (2015, 348) argued that the only cases in which trade unions managed to bring forward European industrial actions were when 'they have been able to politicise the decisions of supranational corporations or public executives in a transnational public sphere'. According to this argument, in the context of the recent European Union economic governance (identified with the 2011 'Six-Pack' regulation), the control power exercised by multinational corporation headquarters on its subsidiaries obliges unions to act on a transnational level only in those cases where national exit options are not viable. Conversely, when such a path can be undertaken, the attempts to politicise EU integration processes rather result in a renationalisation of union politics.

The Ryanair case presented in this report well represents the potentialities as well as the limits of European unionism. The future of the aviation sector is likely to trigger co-operation vs competition dynamics between workers (and unions) of different countries. One important lesson is provided by the automotive sector experience in the early 2000s: unions and European Works Councils (for example Ford, GM, Volkswagen) undertook a series of transnational industrial actions to fight managerial whipsawing practices and showed that (among others achievements) even concession bargaining can be co-ordinated and based on the solidaristic principle of 'sharing the pain internationally' (Greer and Hauptmeier 2008).

Therefore, it will be fundamental for European progressive forces to keep promoting further progressive EU integration policies (the NextGenerationEU plan is an encouraging step forward) to ensure a fair ecological/technological transition.

In the final section we will summarise what we have discussed above and make some proposals to advise union leaders and policy makers on how to possibly address the issues posed by the multiple challenges ahead.

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2   The EIF is a public-private partnership made up of the EIB, the European Commission and a plethora of financial institutions from the EU member states, the UK and Turkey and part of the EIB Group.

Trade unions and the multiple crises of environment, society, economy and work

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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> *The challenges of the ecological transition are immense and a socio-ecological contract is needed to confront them. The notion of 'contract' implies reaching a strong agreement, with a long-term perspective, which works for all parties concerned – this cannot be an agreement vulnerable to the vagaries of day-to-day politics. Fundamentally, such a new contract should link the social and environmental dimensions of the transition – including the underlying economic model.*
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> ❞
>
> **Philippe Pochet, ETUI (Pochet 2021)**

This paper highlighted the multiple crises affecting work and labour today and what trade unions' responses to these crises look like. In an extensive review of existing literature we showed that union structures largely stem from their origins in industrial production and have changed fairly little since. Union representation thus also remains strongest in 'traditional' production sectors and is fairly weak in new types of sector, such as the gig economy.

In this research, the aviation sector was presented as a case study. As a sector where workers have high bargaining power and a traditionally strong union representation, the aviation sector provides a good example of how unions react to sectoral changes and challenges. The aviation sector is currently strongly affected by low-cost carriers changing market dynamics and by digitalisation affecting the sector. Crucially for this research, however, it is directly impacted by the environmental crises and the need for a more sustainable economy.

The interviews conducted with trade unions executives from four European countries reflected that. They all acknowledged the need for change in order to address the environmental crises. Yet, they also proved the difficulties that unions face by having to evaluate the short-term interests of workers versus the long-term need for systemic change: while they know that jobs will only be secure in business models that respect planetary boundaries, they also need to represent the interests of their current members. This makes it harder for unions to join forces with social movements demanding rapid action to stop climate change.

The aviation sector also showed the potential, as well as the limits of, European trade union co-operation. While businesses such as the low-cost carrier Ryanair act across borders, unions do not and co-operation is difficult due to the historically path-dependent and very different setups of union systems. In some instances unions manage to co-operate successfully across European borders, but these remain the exception rather than the rule.

The ETUI's recent approach and new framework for a 'social-ecological contract' (ETUI 2021; Pochet 2021) as well as a flurry of research on post-growth welfare states and providing welfare within planetary boundaries (Bohnenberger and Fritz 2021; Koch 2020, 2021) suggest new avenues and ways forward for European societies.

Based on the findings from our research and the qualitative interviews, we make the following recommendations. They are structured according to the level of actors that they address, looking first at the aviation sector, then at trade unions more generally and finally at social policies overall.

4.1 Recommendations: the aviation sector

- It is clear that unions are facing multiple challenges and crises – societal, economic, environmental – with more immediate threats to social welfare impeding environmental action.

- While the short-term benefit of a sectoral and members-only focus has yielded some positive results, it is unlikely to provide for the long-term welfare of workers and societies, or to be a long-term solution to union revitalisation. Politicising the environmental crises through social-movement-type unionism as well as broader societal alliances are needed for these goals.

- It is unlikely that aviation will cease completely. However, while technological changes and new fuel sources are needed, taking the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2021) report and current environmental scenarios seriously does suggest that the sector will likely have to decrease operations in the next decades. To avoid further price dumping, unions must be serious about the realities of the environmental crises and fight for the long-term welfare of workers – with a

view to the long-term horizon of the aviation industry according to the most recent scientific analyses and realities, not business narratives of climate delay and naive technological optimism.

- Policies to protect workers need to go beyond mere job preservation. Workers need the right to retrain to prepare for the transition away from emission-heavy industries. Unions have a key role in politicising the environmental crises and ensuring that necessary societal decarbonisation happens with societal welfare at the centre of policies.

- Money provided by the European recovery plan should be invested in long-term projects to make the aviation sector more sustainable, not business-as-usual, as well as for reskilling workers wishing to leave the sector.

- European companies need stronger European Works Councils (EWC): the EWC directive should be reinforced, as continuously requested by the ETUC, in order to effectively bind corporations to negotiate with workers' representatives on a transnational level. Making EWC more incisive may encourage national unions to invest more in European co-operation.

4.2 Recommendations: trade unions and the multiple crises

- Trade unions need to become opinion leaders on just transition and the need for new business models. This requires unions to move away from policies focusing on job preservation and improvement alone, as well as solely country-based or sector-based foci.

- Unions should advocate for new post-growth models that secure workers' rights and their social welfare. This includes advocating for a significant reduction in (and redistribution of) working hours as a means to reduce the environmental impact of labour.

- Unions, especially at the company (shop-floor) level, should invest more resources in building networks with digital technologies experts, in order to increase their knowledge and be able to significantly influence the way a new technology is implemented in the workplace. This should be done also by taking into account how GDPR may protect workers from exploitative and alienating monitoring digital systems (Nogarede 2021).

4.3 Recommendations: social policies for societal welfare and environmental sustainability

- Establish a European Agency on Sustainable Welfare within the European Commission to steer and direct implementation of the European Green Deal and to help EU countries to transition to sustainable welfare systems (Bohnenberger and Fritz 2021).

- Use the European Pillar of Social Rights to enable workers to demand their employers take environmental costs into account and refuse avoidable work practices that unnecessarily hurt the environment such as business flights.

- A new European Climate Insurance should be developed to support green employment and work towards a just transition to a more sustainable economic model.

- Other policies to escape the jobs and growth treadmill include a public (and voluntary) eco-social jobs guarantee, universal basic services (to reduce the emissions associated with welfare), a social-ecological basic income, and the previously mentioned importance of working-time reduction to reduce the impacts of work and production (Wiese and Mayrhofer 2020).

- The 'Social Ecological Contract' supported by the ETUI offers a potential way to combine environmental and social crises through reframing the crises as a security issue.

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• generating a forum for political discussion and thus helping to introduce social democratic positions into the public discussion;

• training representatives of the Austrian Social Democratic Party so that they are optimally prepared for their present and future tasks;

• fostering the organizational development of the Austrian Social Democratic Party in order to open up and modernize party structures.

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The FEPS Young Academics Network was established in March 2010 with an aim to gather promising progressive PhD candidates and young PhD researchers ready to use their academic experience in a debate about the Next, Progressive Europe. Realised with the support of Renner Institut in the framework of the FEPS "Next Left" Research Programme, the project has gathered throughout the years more than 250 members – many of whom are today Professors of Renown Universities, Prominent Experts in their respective fields and Front Bench Politicians. Their exchanges and interdisciplinary research at the time of their involvement have resulted in a number of stimulating studies, providing a relevant contribution to the European progressive movement.