

Getting Serious About Keeping Fossil Fuels in the Ground Means Getting Serious About a Just Transition

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[HTTP://WWW.COUNTERPUNCH.ORG/2016/04/22/GETTING-SERIOUS-ABOUT-KEEPING-FOSSIL-FUELS-IN-THE-GROUND-MEANS-GETTING-SERIOUS-ABOUT-A-JUST-TRANSITION/](http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/04/22/getting-serious-about-keeping-fossil-fuels-in-the-ground-means-getting-serious-about-a-just-transition/)

As the climate crisis continues to deepen and as it becomes less and less plausible that current efforts to curb global warming will even come close to preventing our earth from crossing the 2 degree Celsius ‘red line,’ the climate movement has shifted towards a bolder vision for climate action. Virtually every pole of the climate movement has evolved towards a set of bolder, more urgent demands and the mantra ‘keep it in the ground’ has begun to dominate the discussion about fossil fuel extraction and use.

While this bold position certainly reflects the urgency of the threat of climate change, the immediacy of the demand presents a new set of challenges for the climate movement. What happens to the millions of working families who are currently depending on incomes from jobs in and related to the fossil fuel industry? And what happens to communities whose economies rely on income from the fossil fuel industry and the low income workers as revenue dries up and energy costs rise?

According recent data from the BLS, 761,000 workers are employed in the extraction and mining sector and 116,700 workers are employed in the refining and processing sector in the United States alone. Each one of those direct fossil fuel industry jobs supports as many as 7 related jobs—from delivery drivers, equipment manufacturers, to the clerks at the mini-mart across the street from the power plant that workers stop into on their way to

work. In total, it is fair to say that more than 6 million workers rely on the fossil fuel industry for their livelihoods in the US alone.

If we are going to keep fossil fuels in the ground, what happens to those 6 million working families?

Most climate justice organizations have adopted some messaging around a call for ‘just transition’ for workers and communities that are impacted by a shift away from fossil fuels in their public platforms. But it’s not clear what this ‘just transition’ would actually look like or how it materially amounts to anything more than just a messaging point.

For many, the concept of a just transition evokes images of workers walking off of their jobs in coal mines and oil refineries and walking into a factory right next door building wind turbines or solar panels. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with work in industrial manufacturing knows that vision is a fantasy.

Setting aside the most important factor—those ‘green energy jobs’ simply don’t exist in the numbers needed to transition the number of workers currently depending on work in the fossil fuel industry—the skills fossil fuel industry workers have spent decades honing are often not immediately transferable to other industries, the wind and solar jobs that do exist are not generally in close proximity to where energy workers (and their families) live, Further, these jobs generally pay a fraction of the wages and benefits that the largely unionized fossil fuel workforce currently experiences.

The challenges of an abrupt transition away from fossil fuels will extend beyond just the workers who rely on incomes in the fossil fuel industry. As workers look to find new jobs, oil refinery and coal mining communities will find themselves struggling to provide basic services to residents as the primary sources of revenue dry up. While many in the climate movement

envision a future where energy from renewables is available at the same cost—if not cheaper than—energy from fossil fuels, the transition will almost certainly be accompanied by at least a temporary spike in energy costs. Even a small spike in energy costs could spell serious trouble for low wage workers already living on the economic edge.

If the climate movement is going to get serious about keeping fossil fuels in the ground, the movement needs to get serious about cultivating a real vision for a just transition. If we're going to see coal-fired power plants and oil refineries and chemical plants shut down we need to have a real vision about what the future looks like for those workers, their families and their communities.

Anyone who has been involved in, or even around a plant closure or a mass layoff knows how disruptive and violent that transition can be. There are too many a 40-something refinery workers forced to leave their job of 25 years with skills that aren't directly transferable to other industries only to find themselves in poverty-level service sector jobs. There are too many factory towns turned into ghost towns as all of the families evacuated after the primary employer shut down and left town. There are too many good people who've lost their jobs and couldn't find ways to support their families that began to believe that suicide is the only way out.

The concept of a 'just transition' isn't new. It was popularized in the 1980's by Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) leader Tony Mazzocchi. As Mazzocchi navigated a challenging time as a leader in an energy union during the rapid growth of the modern environmental and antinuclear movements in the United States he argued that workers who were displaced as a result of shifting energy sources deserved support in transitioning to new jobs. His initial proposal was for a Superfund for Workers, arguing "*there is a Superfund for dirt. There ought to be one for workers.*"

The idea that workers who are displaced as a result of public policy isn't radical and it's not a novelty. Under the Trade Act of 1974 (and subsequent amendments) workers who are displaced as a result of trade are eligible for two years of unemployment compensation and two years of job training benefits. Even that falls far short in offering a smooth transition—particularly in communities experiencing concentrated unemployment caused by a plant closure impacting hundreds or even thousands of workers. Meanwhile, workers who are displaced as a result of environmental regulations are only statutorily entitled to 26 weeks of unemployment compensation.

Over the past three decades the concept of a just transition has gained popularity-if not specificity. The 2013 International Labor Organization passed its “Resolution concerning sustainable development, decent work and green jobs.” The resolution called for a just transition for workers whose jobs are eliminated as a result of environmental policy but appropriately noted that, “there is no ‘one-size-fits-all.’ Policies and programmes need to be designed in line with the specific conditions of countries, including their stage of development, economic sectors and sizes of enterprises”.

Although most of the discussion about just transitions center on financial assistance and job training opportunities for workers who have already lost their jobs, some of the most important questions in articulating a vision for a just transition relate to how, when, and even if jobs should be eliminated. It seems relatively intuitive that shutting down an oil refinery would reduce carbon emissions but it is not always that straightforward.

Without addressing demand for fossil fuels and building alternatives to scale, shutting down oil refineries in the United States would likely have little impact on global carbon emissions. As refineries close in the United States, crude oil is increasingly being exported to new mega-refineries like the new Reliance Industries 1.24 million barrel per day refinery in India only to be refined and shipped back for sale in gas stations around the country. These

refineries operate with fewer environmental or safety regulations than those in the United States and the carbon emissions generated by floating crude oil halfway around the world and shipping refined products back could even mean an even greater carbon footprint. If the climate movement is serious about cultivating a just transition, we need to make sure that we're actually reducing carbon emissions and not just pushing jobs and refineries out of our own backyards and into other communities.

Climate change and its catastrophic impacts on our communities and planet are, without a doubt, the most pressing issues facing our world today. We need mass education, we mass mobilization, and we need mass resistance to build a real social movement to slow the devastating effects of climate change. But we also need to have a real, serious conversation about what a just transition looks like in our economy.

There are a myriad of proposals floating for serious just transition programs, from Mazzocchi's Superfund for Workers which would provide four years of pay and training, to the expansion of TAA benefits to energy workers, to Senator Sanders' proposed Clean Energy Worker Just Transition Act. It is not clear exactly what a just transition program for energy workers could or should look like, but if the climate movement really wants to keep fossil fuels in the ground it's time to get serious about answering these questions.

A real just transition certainly doesn't mean telling the millions of families who depend on jobs in and related to the fossil fuel industry that they need to 'just transition' to low-wage service sector jobs or to the handful of low-paying jobs in the wind or solar industries. If we're going to stop—or even slow—climate change we all need to transition together.