



# Tackling the Climate Crisis—Towards a Just, Sustainable, and Public Future

A Just Transition for All Workers and Their Communities

2023





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



## A Just Transition for All Workers and Their Communities

A Just Transition is a core part of meaningful action on climate change. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines Just Transition as

greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. A Just Transition involves maximizing the social and economic opportunities of climate action, while minimizing and carefully managing any challenges.<sup>1</sup>

It bears repeating that both processes—minimizing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities—of the transition to a green economy are necessary. But it is worth emphasizing that there are opportunities in tackling the climate crisis—for job creation, for diversifying our economy, and for building a more resilient and sustainable economy.

Just Transition is often discussed in the context of an energy transition and the workers in this sector. That is because energy transitions—away from a fossil-fuel-based economy and to one based in renewable energy—are necessary. But it is not a given that the process will be just. In solidarity with workers in this industry, NUPGE has long supported the call for a Just Transition to ensure those workers have new opportunities and the supports they need.

Just Transition applies to other sectors too. Decarbonizing our economy will affect all workers in communities that depend on the fossil fuel industry, such as those employed in food services, accommodation, retail, and health care. Furthermore, Just Transition refers to a broader economic transition to a more sustainable economy.

In this process, workers and unions need to be leading the way on determining what a Just Transition looks like in a particular workplace, sector, or region. What is known as *social dialogue*—among workers, employers, and governments—is an essential component of Just Transition.<sup>2</sup> This doesn't mean a one-time consultation; it means that workers and their unions need to be at the table in every sector and at every step of the transition.

This was one of the clear messages in the final report of the Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities. Among the recommended principles for a Just Transition was worker participation at every stage of the transition.<sup>3</sup> Governments have a responsibility to intervene, convening dialogue with workers, industry, and communities, to ensure a managed transition that does not cast aside affected workers and communities.

This process of social dialogue must also include Indigenous peoples. Lessons can be learned from New Zealand, for example, where their Just Transition process has involved Maori representatives, world views, and values.<sup>4</sup>

At a workplace level, workers and their unions can also demand to be part of these discussions through collective bargaining. For example, workers can bargain for joint workplace committees on the environment, similar to those on health and safety.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of concrete policies and programs, a Just Transition will require investing in measures like income supports, training, career-planning advice, and maintenance of benefits and pensions for workers in affected industries. It should include financial bridging for older workers who choose to retire, ensuring they receive full pension credits. Related to training, Just Transition will require increased investment in our public education systems.

It is important that climate action, including Just Transition law and policies, explicitly and proactively incorporates equity. Otherwise, Just Transition measures run the risk of reproducing existing inequities or contributing to further marginalization. Research shows that this has happened with previous Just Transition policies.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to a strong social safety net, we need proactive Just Transition policies to support building a green economy. This must involve workforce development and supports for communities, as well as policies to promote workforce diversification and inclusion. It also requires increased investment in public education systems.

Just Transition requires not piecemeal measures, but a coherent industrial strategy that creates good, green, and unionized jobs and sustainable communities. Broadly speaking, Just Transition is about a larger economic transformation that seeks to eradicate poverty, advance equity, and ensure decent work for all.<sup>7</sup> As outlined in the third backgrounder in this series, investing in public services is also important because of their role in responding to the effects of climate change, which are expected to intensify. Strong public services can also provide good, green, and unionized jobs for the future.

This vision of Just Transition is not a pipe dream. Research by the Centre for Future Work, which examined the Canadian labour market and energy transitions in other jurisdictions, found that a transition away from fossil fuels can happen without sacrificing secure livelihoods or strong job markets—if it is done through long-term planning, generous income supports and adjustment assistance, and strong commitments to creating alternative employment.<sup>8</sup>

Although the transition understandably brings about a sense of fear and insecurity, workers do support a Just Transition. A 2021 poll commissioned by Iron & Earth, a worker-led organization, found that

- 88% of fossil fuel workers are interested in skills and training development for jobs in the clean economy.
- 80% support a national upskilling initiative.
- 69% are interested in switching to a career in the net-zero economy.<sup>9</sup>

The Trudeau government has been promising legislation on Just Transition since 2019. NUPGE has been pressuring the federal government to enact Just Transition measures and legislation since 2019 and submitted recommendations to the consultation in 2021.

The government introduced the proposed *Canadian Sustainable Jobs Act* in June 2023. It is a framework bill, meaning it focuses on principles and on setting up the institutional structures to implement a Just Transition. It does not deal with government spending or with the actual measures needed for a Just Transition. At the time of writing, there is still the possibility of strengthening the act.

A report by the CCPA outlined what an ambitious Just Transition Act could look like.<sup>10</sup> It outlines the rights and principles that should underpin legislation. But it goes beyond these, outlining some of the programs that would facilitate a Just Transition, such as

- a Just Transition Benefit to support workers, and
- a Just Transition Training Fund to ensure access to employment in the low-carbon economy for historically marginalized groups.

It also identifies institutional mechanisms, like a Just Transition Commission to oversee and guide the process, a new Crown corporation to invest in job-creation projects, and a new federal-provincial/territorial Just Transition Transfer for new social programs.

We need the political will of governments to make Just Transition a reality. If governments are proactive, rather than reactive, tackling the climate crisis through a true Just Transition is an opportunity to build a more equitable and just society in the process.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions on just transition,” International Labour Organization, accessed September 11, 2023, [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/green-jobs/WCMS\\_824102/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/green-jobs/WCMS_824102/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>2</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All* (Geneva: ILO, 2015), [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/documents/publication/wcms\\_432859.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_432859.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Canada’s Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities, *Final Report by the Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities* (Gatineau: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2018), <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/climate-change/task-force-just-transition/final-report.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Sitara Morgenster, “Can the Taranaki 2050 Roadmap create a blueprint for just transition and social dialogue in New Zealand?” *Equal Times*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.equaltimes.org/can-the-taranaki-2050-roadmap#.YheyQejMLIU>; New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, *Next Steps on Just Transition to Good, Green Jobs: CTU agenda for 2020 and into the new parliamentary term* (NZCTU, October 2019) <https://union.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Next-Steps-on-Just-Transition-Oct-2019.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “Collaborate to Reduce GHGs,” Labour Education Centre, accessed September 11, 2023, [https://www.laboureducation.org/collaborate\\_reduce\\_ghgs](https://www.laboureducation.org/collaborate_reduce_ghgs).

<sup>6</sup> Hadrian Mertins-Kirkwood and Zaeesh Deshpande, *Who is Included in a Just Transition? Considering social equity in Canada’s shift to a zero-carbon economy* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Adapting Canadian Work and Workplaces to Respond to Climate Change, August 2019), <https://policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/who-is-included-just-transition>.

<sup>7</sup> ILO, “Guidelines for a just transition.”

<sup>8</sup> Jim Stanford, *Employment Transitions and the Phase-Out of Fossil Fuels* (Vancouver: Centre for Future Work, January 2021), <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Employment-Transitions-Report-Final.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> “Prosperous Transition Plan,” Iron & Earth, accessed September 11, 2023, [https://www.ironandearth.org/prosperous\\_transition\\_plan](https://www.ironandearth.org/prosperous_transition_plan); “Climate Emergency Polling & Transition to Renewable Sources with Oil & Gas Sector Workers – Detailed Results,” Abacus Data, May 2021, [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ironandearth/pages/1702/attachments/original/1635867551/Abacus\\_-\\_Iron\\_\\_Earth\\_poll\\_July\\_13\\_.pdf?1635867551](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ironandearth/pages/1702/attachments/original/1635867551/Abacus_-_Iron__Earth_poll_July_13_.pdf?1635867551).

<sup>10</sup> Hadrian Mertins-Kirkwood and Clay Duncalfe, *Roadmap to a Canadian Just Transition Act: A path to a clean and inclusive economy* (Ottawa: CCPA, April 2021), <https://policyalternatives.ca/roadmap>.

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The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of the Public Services International.