

Ways Out of the Growth Trap

by Ulrich Brand

Trade Unions, Climate Crisis and the “Ecology of Work”

As the remarkable success of “Fridays for Future” and “Extinction Rebellion” shows, the climate crisis is pushing onto the agenda ever more strongly. Such a push is urgently needed because the window during which its worst effects could be prevented is closing rapidly.¹ Accordingly, the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 to 90 per cent by the year 2050 is now widely accepted, although climate movements demand a significantly earlier drop in CO₂ emissions toward zero. What needs more attention is that the consumption of natural resources must also be drastically addressed in the industrialized countries.

At this point, however, the ‘ever more and ever faster’ creed of constant production increasingly blocks an ecologically compatible mode of production and living. Currently, global resource and climate policy continue to point in an entirely different direction, namely that of unsustainable development. This tendency is related to the rise of emerging countries, such as China, and the enormous rise in material prosperity there, but also to the entirely insufficient course change in early industrialized countries.² The imperial mode of production and living appears to be firmly anchored: The unsustainable patterns of production and consumption are based on an – in principle – unlimited appropriation of the

resources and labour power of both the global North and the global South, and of a disproportionate claim to global sinks (like forests and oceans in the case of CO₂). A core mechanism of the functioning of the imperial mode of living – more precisely: the imperial mode of production and living – is that worldwide relationships of domination, power and exploitation remain intact and at the same time invisible, i.e. that they are in a way normalized within Northern societies.³



However, young people's discomfort with the attitudes of political elites and the older generation in general – attitudes that don't even seriously confront these tasks – is currently politicized by the emerging Fridays for Future movement. However, an entirely different organization of the economy, politics and society, even the establishment of new relationships between humans and nature, is up for discussion – one that would achieve profound social-ecological transformations.

The social-ecological crisis causes an unequal social distribution of the negative effects on the environment, such as working conditions, noise or pollution and the allocation of the cost of climate policy. Additional questions are about the distribution of hours of paid work, as well as the allocation of other social – that is, unpaid but necessary – work to (re)produce social life. Questions of climate and environmental policy are strongly related to questions about the distribution of income and assets, but they are also about socio-political power and unevenly distributed opportunities for influencing and shaping policy.

So far, trade unions and employees have not played a central role in this discussion. Rather, the debate is focused on consumers that must be sensitized to ecological issues, on appropriate government policies, as well as on innovations by companies and management, and investment in “green” industries. In particular, trade unions are often seen more as obstacles on issues of environmental and climate policy. An example of this perception is the 420-page expert opinion on a “Great Transformation” issued by the German government’s Advisory Council on Global Change that has been discussed intently for a few years now. While it has much to say about “pioneers of change,” “global governance” and “forming state,” trade unions only show up briefly, and do so, of all things, under the subheading “Opposing Forces and Resistance: Lobbying and Special Interest Groups.” It criticizes, for example, employee representatives joining industry associations to successfully argue for the scrapping bonuses⁴ during the post-2008 crisis.⁵

From a politically progressive point of view, further weakening of trade unions cannot be accepted. Rather, a task of the century such as social-ecological transformations will

only succeed if such relevant actors as trade unions are an active part of it. However, this also means conversely that socio-ecological tasks must become core issues for trade unions. This is true if only because the ecological crisis has a (global) class dimension: Wealthy people can protect themselves better from the effects of climate change and other environmental changes, while the lower classes are already directly impacted by its consequences.⁶

In this article, I deal with the central aspects of the more recent discussion about the role of trade unions in social-ecological transformations in Germany. I concentrate on recent discussions within IG Metall – with currently just under 2.3 million members, the largest individual trade union in the world. However, IG Metall's political dilemmas are just an example of similar problems in trade unions in other industries and countries.

Here I start from the widely shared position that trade unions must assume a stronger social-ecological direction. However, the industrial trade unions, in particular, are faced with a dilemma regarding ecological questions.⁷ On the one hand, trade unions are “organizations fighting for their members” for their members and the members' interest in good working conditions, income and job security. To this end they need, in addition to institutional embedding in the respective political system, a strong power to organize and mobilize, in particular. But that organizational power can be found mainly in industries that are not 'future-proof' from an ecological point of view. At the same time, the medium-term prospects for some industries are precarious, even despite the relatively stable economic situation in Germany. Above all, the automotive industry must be noted in this respect; in this country, more than 870,000 people work in that industry and at

its suppliers. IG Metall organizes almost half a million people in this industry, which is a strong fifth of its membership. Since it, like all DGB [German Federation of Trade Unions] trade unions, is under political pressure during neoliberal times, these employees are an important support with which the union can achieve its demands.

On the other hand, specific industries are more likely to benefit from the social-ecological conversion. These industries include mechanical engineering or the electrical sector – and employees there are also trade union members.

Political Trepidation: What Will Have Happened in 2030?

I am motivated to make these observations because of a kind of political-historical trepidation. In trade union debates about West Germany, and since the 1990s about all of Germany – but this applies similarly also in other countries – there is a dominant narrative about the handling of environmental policy concerns.⁸ That narrative is more or less this: environmental policy topics were discussed in companies and trade unions already in the 1970s, but these topics were relegated to the background because of the global economic crisis that began in 1974, the start of mass unemployment and neoliberal strategies, along with the early stages of dismantling social safety nets.

The second half of the 1980s is viewed similarly. After the reactor accident in Chernobyl in 1986, a slow change in position was asserted in the trade unions, which until then had mostly supported atomic energy. Dangers to the environment

and health, for example by materials that are especially harmful to the environment, also gained greater attention. However, in the course of German reunification, companies' increasing focus on shareholders and the expansion of business segments to other countries, questions of job security and wages again became a stronger focus; a "lost decade" in terms of employment and environmental policy ensued.⁹

From the late 1990s on, the narrative continues, trade unions again raised ecological questions and achieved, for example, the anchoring of environmental protection within companies in the Works Constitution Act. The economic crisis of 2007/2008, however, returned trade unions to their "core mandates."

For a few years now, social-ecological questions have again received greater attention, for example in the course of the diesel scandal, greater development of the climate crisis and electrical mobility topics or the international agreement on the UN Goals for Sustainable Development in 2015. But what happens – this is my trepidation – if by 2030, the then-current part of the narrative is more or less this: The uncertain perspectives of the conversion process, as well as the crisis starting in the mid-2020s, have returned trade unions to their "social core business," defending jobs and representing interests in a narrow sense?

Against this background, I want to contribute to the discussion from a dedicated social-ecological perspective in order to help work against the weakening of trade unions. Hans-Jürgen Urban, elected member of the board of directors of IG Metall and one of the most important left trade union strategists in the German-speaking world, says the following: an "analytical understanding of the dimensions of ecological

problems and a corresponding strategy are still missing (also) in trade unions.”¹⁰

“Ecology of Work”

Meanwhile, trade unions and employees are certainly (again) showing sensitivity about ecological and related social problems. At least within trade unions’ socially-ecologically sensitive sector, a consensus is increasingly possible that the point is “to find a development route that uses resources efficiently and is greenhouse gas-neutral and to actually go the route that allows the growing global population a good life and a fairer distribution of greater prosperity,” as Wolfgang Lemb, elected member of the board of directors of IG Metall, says.¹¹ A transformation of the capitalist industrial society must proceed in a socially just manner, that is, it cannot be resolved on the backs of those who already have to struggle materially and live under uncertain conditions. However, this causes conflicts about goals, as Lemb’s further explanations highlight: “At the core of good industrial policy, therefore, are for IG Metall stable jobs and good working conditions that are secured by collective bargaining agreements.”¹² Currently, job security wins during this conflict in the trade unions. However, in view of ecological and climate policy requirements, this focus could be too narrow.

In trade union debates, I therefore find the term “ecology of work” interesting. It covers “operational, but also social and nature-related aspects of expenditure and regeneration of the human work capacity,” includes strategies for good (paid) work and is part of the context for a social-ecological conversion strategy.¹³ Natural material cycles and human labour power,

says the correct diagnosis, all tend toward being overloaded and overly exploited, which endangers the reproduction of labour power and nature – and thus the functioning of society as a whole. The goal, therefore, is to establish, first, the “greening of production, consumption and distribution” and secondly “a new regime for the distribution of income, assets and social opportunities for livelihood,” as well as, thirdly, to democratize “economic decisions and structures.”¹⁴ This requires broad alliances that can handle conflicts and also endure them.¹⁵

These important impulses from the debate about an ecology of work point at the same time to a number of problems in progressive debates about social-ecological questions. For one, political perspectives are narrowed to an “ecological modernization” – and thus do too little justice to the social, and especially ecological, requirements of social-ecological transformations. This is because social institutions such as ownership structures or the capitalist state, as well as the competitive imperatives of capitalism, such as a drive toward profits and growth, must also be questioned and changed in a democratic process. Secondly, trade unions hold onto the German model of production – including its focus on exports – and accordingly barely question the orientation toward greater efficiency and a focus on international competition. Thirdly, the perspectives formulated with the intention of transformation significantly lag behind the important insights from debates that are critical of growth. And fourthly, trade unions – based on what currently exists and its corresponding contradictions as “children of industrial capitalism” – could become a space for ‘organic worker-intellectuals’ supporting a good life for people who depend on wages.

All four items listed, which I will discuss in more detail

below, are covered by a fundamental consideration: trade unions often say that more radical social-ecological issues could turn off a large part of their membership, which, in turn, would cause the unions to weaken organizationally and politically. Conversely, however, we could ask whether and to what extent parts of the workforce have developed greater awareness of crisis and change than trade unions give them credit for. Furthermore, with credible social-ecological positions that are appropriate to the problems, trade unions would again become more visible and able to form coalitions – and thus increase their power in society. Thus, it is in the trade unions' inherent interest to take leave of a static idea of their members' interests. Rather, these interests are dynamic and can be affected by learning processes and personal experiences (actually, there is little research about what members think and feel).

Beyond Ecological-Capitalist Modernization

The first problem of progressive politics is the fact that trade unions remain very strongly attached to “ecological modernization.”¹⁶ This can be seen clearly in the positions that IG Metall takes, when it argues for further raising the efficiency of combustion engines and expanding electromobility. This, despite the fact that electric cars are not more sustainable in principle; they also require much energy and resources, they need road-centric infrastructures and therefore offer neither an answer to the climate crisis nor a solution for tight urban spaces.¹⁷

This problem can also be seen in the core diagnosis: trade

unions mostly talk about a climate crisis. While this is correct, a second dimension is just as important for industrial production: the question of raw materials. These are mostly imported, there is enormous price pressure on the producers of raw materials and their extraction is to some extent accompanied by significant conflicts because of resistance from local residents, who are dispossessed of their basis for life, such as clean water or arable land. The national, and especially international, material input that the German model of production requires is given way too little consideration by trade unions. If unions addressed this situation more explicitly, they would have to conclude that industrial production – as well as industrial portions of services, such as flying – must be greatly reduced.

However, there is little reflection on this problem. For example, Wolfgang Lemb argues that in order to achieve the goal of 80 per cent reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2050, 90 per cent of German industry must be penetrated by efficient technologies and by 2050 two thirds of all cars – i.e., 26 million – must be powered electrically.¹⁸ Apart from the fact that the term “efficient technologies” is rather general, electrical engines will certainly not be enough to reduce raw material consumption, in addition to emissions. For resources are needed not only for manufacturing new products but also for maintaining the existing infrastructure. A drastic reduction in biophysical input is therefore required for ecological reasons.

How Will the Export Champion Be Converted Socially-Ecologically?

Another consideration is that economies that are internationalized to a high degree, such as the German one depend on the permanent influx of raw materials and stable sales markets. However, the international entanglements that accompany this direction and the ecological implications of such entanglements are an insufficiently important topic for trade unions – for example, discussions of ecological and social management along internationalized supply chains and corresponding legal regulations are only in their infancy. Trade unions do demand “competitive sustainability in terms of a political regulation of the transformation process, which does not ignore the manifest economic market and competitive pressures, but raises the needs of work, society and nature against these pressures.”¹⁹ But what does this mean on an international level and in relation to regions that are less competitive? How is the fact that value-added chains are often “value-*deconstructed* chains” (Stephan Lessenich) taken into account analytically and politically?

Trade unions do demand regulatory framework conditions within Germany that “lead to a competition for transformation and avoid a competition of displacement.”²⁰ However, on the international level, companies from strong export countries put pressure on companies and industries elsewhere. Here the German export model is almost exclusively aligned with industrial production. For example, the automotive industry alone increased its proportion of the manufacturing sector’s gross value added from 13 per cent in 2002 to 18 per cent in 2016. While vehicle construction accounted for slightly over 16 per cent of overall exports in 1993, its proportion rose to 22 per cent by 2016.²¹

In this context, another rarely questioned assumption becomes a problem, namely, that production and distribution processes

are “efficient” and that ecological problems must be handled with “efficient technologies.” However, there is a catch from an ecological perspective: profits from greater efficiency mean production costs trend lower and end products become cheaper. The income so freed is then used for additional consumption – a typical rebound effect that damages the environment.^{[22](#)}

A similar effect is observed when work is divided in terms of space and functions. Industrial specialization and the tendency to expand spatial limits are “efficient,” because they lead to comparative cost savings. However, these savings are skimmed off and turned into additional output. An ecologically sustainable economy should instead significantly shorten value-added chains and assert societal control over them. Hence, the challenge is to achieve efficiency gains without material growth and still allow for redistribution. So far, however, the competition for innovation is more of a driver of growth. This has another effect: “If the responsibility for all consequences of the overall process is distributed across a sufficiently large number of competencies, it is essentially nullified.”^{[23](#)}

Against the Capitalist Growth Imperative

Thirdly, the vast majority of socially-ecologically sensitive sectors in trade unions argue for “sustainable growth”^{[24](#).^{[25](#)}} However, growth, as the crucial economic policy point of reference and as an indicator of prosperity and quality of life, no longer holds. But today nothing less than fundamentally questioning the capitalist growth imperative is needed – in view of the obvious ecological problems, but also

in view of declining growth rates in early industrialized countries. Moreover, for trade unions it is important that economic growth is not just a more and more exclusive process of material well-being and (re-)distribution. It is based upon and reinforces social relations in which life opportunities and spaces of action, assets and income are distributed unevenly. It guarantees economically, politically and culturally manifold social inclusion and exclusion, class and property relations, the asymmetrical relationship between men and women, between majority and minorities, as well as international inequalities.^{[26](#)}

Therefore, trade unions might consider to more strongly adopt the impulses from the debate that criticise growth and not denounce these as “ecological austerity.”^{[27](#)} For the degrowth movement “presents as a problem at its core the technologically and institutionally supported escalation logic of the societies of the global North”^{[28](#)}, in which trade unions certainly participate.

From a social-ecological perspective, by contrast, the point is that production, distribution and consumption quality must be compatible with society and nature. Whether the national economy grows in the process is a secondary question. It is more important to, for example, expand services of general interest, roll back industrial agriculture and, in the medium term, liberate society from automotive mobility, for example by reducing daily “forced” mobility and switching to public transportation. In the beginning, this leads to great investments and thus growth, but the question here is the extent to which this growth is driven by exchange value and profit or is, instead, aligned with use value.

The degrowth perspective here targets a model of prosperity that satisfies individual and collective needs in a manner compatible with social and ecological goals, i.e., not at the expense of other people or regions and nature. This model is ambitious because needs differ very substantially. Thus, in addition to redistribution, the question is mainly how wealth is produced. An elaborate critique of growth therefore deals with how the means of production are controlled and investments structured, and by whom: joint property is a necessary condition for reducing dependence on growth that is driven by capitalism.^{[29](#)}

For trade unions, this critique of growth is also enriching because the question during collective bargaining increasingly is “more time or more money.” The desire to reduce working hours is rising, especially by getting more vacation days, not so much by reducing weekly working hours.^{[30](#)} IG Metall strongly embedded this desire into its current collective bargaining agreement from the autumn of 2018 – and thereby opened an important window. For higher incomes not only tend to lead to more consumption, but a solidary-working-hours policy is required in any case in view of the necessary dismantling of industrial manufacturing in sectors such as the automotive industry – and it also makes sense for many companies, given the shortage of skilled workers. In this respect, IG Metall is part of a progressive tradition: The trade union paper *Die Mitbestimmung* wrote already 40 years ago: “Work should be useful and its result should satisfy human needs. This is not always the case. While certain products are questionable, dangerous or unreasonable *a priori*, other products reach critical limits beyond a certain production volume (for example, cars). Switching to socially useful products, called product conversion, is a necessary partial answer to ecological and social crises and problems.”^{[31](#)}

However, Steffen Liebig notes that while shorter working hours are an important topic both in more recent trade union and social-ecological discussions, “so far, there are hardly any significant points of contact between the two camps.” This is due to the problem of having very few assertive actors for a social-ecological transformation.³²

However, a perspective that criticises capitalism and domination can certainly open up a space for thinking and acting on questions of industrial conversion – and thus structural policies.³³ Trade unions would again become an active part of debates about the future with such strategic considerations, and would also pose an important question: which industries and services are wanted and needed going forward? Trade unions should consider not to leave the answer to management and company owners.

“Trade Unions for Future”?

Fourthly, within trade unions, it is a more corporate interest in maintaining the *status quo* that is prevailing at this time, often enough in the co-management mode. During union debates, “the” employees and their supposed interest in income and job retention are often mentioned. The tendency is to reduce questions of individual and societal room for manoeuvre to bargaining power, working conditions, income and job security. Company governance and social disciplining are rarely questioned here. Thus, trade unions are in danger of abandoning a more comprehensive perspective of participation or even emancipation. This has dramatic consequences. For a social-ecological transformation must be designed as a project in which societal and individual interests are sounded out, and comprehensive participation and democratization are

encouraged.³⁴

And who would, in principle, be better suited to this work than trade unions? In addition to direct representation of interests, active trade unionists are, after all, also “organic intellectuals” in terms of Antonio Gramsci. They can offer orientation, especially during confusing times, and contribute to processing contradictory requirements and experiences. In parts of the workforce, a pronounced awareness of crises and the need for change appears to be already forming. Active trade unionists could therefore politicize unredeemed societal and individual promises of freedom and a good living, which are usually drowned in subjugation and consumerism. The collective self-confidence of the workforce could thereby be strengthened. However, if this is not achieved, trade unions remain stuck in a representation mode and run the risk of unilaterally, or even exclusively, emphasizing the supposed interest of employees’ job retention instead of a broader understanding of the interests of workers in good working and living conditions and a healthy environment.

A blind spot of trade unions has so far been their insufficient interlinking of the modes of living and production. Consumption, an Austrian trade unionist remarked critically during a discussion, is still treated as a “private matter.” But without such a comprehensive view of interlinking, it is hardly possible to think about social-ecological perspectives. Such a broader view is furthermore crucial for giving the often-raised demand for expanded co-management or even economic democracy a social-ecological direction. Otherwise, there is no guarantee at all that more participation also leads to the necessary reduction in using natural resources.



Trade unions could therefore more openly follow cultural changes. They could support the climate strike movement as Trade Unions for Future or Workers for Future. Here they could emphasize that new streets lead to more car traffic and thus are not only a disaster for climate policy but also mean more noise and air pollution for those living nearby – often these are company employees. Through learning processes and also conflicts, trade unions could thus gain credibility if they supported necessary driving restrictions in cities or car-free Sundays – and thus the protection of health and quality of life. This support would not be primarily directed against the interests of those employed in the automotive

industry but would strengthen the demand for a politically well-complemented conversion of the automotive sector.

Thus, trade unions could take social-ecological requirements more seriously – and could in the process also gain credibility and power in society. In capitalism, the needs of people have never been the focus; rather, the focus has been on profit and capital accumulation. Good, dignified living conditions for broad swaths of the population always had to be wrested from capital. This dynamic is aggravated in times of ecological crisis, which is mainly caused by the capitalist growth paradigm: A social-ecological turnaround must be fought for against capital and the politicians that support capital. A core issue here is the politicization of questions such as shorter working hours or production's stronger direction toward use value, for example, in the form of a strong public sector. Thus, climate, degrowth and worker movements can converge.

To achieve this – and here trade unions' criticism of many social movements is correct – environmentalists must also engage with the realities of life and the views of those who work in the coal, steel, chemicals or automotive industries. This is the only way to create a basis for a joint struggle to fundamentally convert the mode of production and living. And only such a conversion will ensure an adequate life, political participation and maintenance of the natural foundations of life. •

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Let's Use the Current Opportunity to Develop a Climate-Friendly Transport System

by Heinz Högelsberger & Ulrich Brand

Two transport policy topics were discussed the most over the last few days: On the one hand, how more space for movement can be secured for pedestrians during Covid-19 times; on the other hand, whether Austrian Airlines should be bailed out using taxpayer' money. These questions have a deeply social component: Walking is the preferred mode of locomotion for poor people. But just in Vienna alone, 38 percent of sidewalks are narrower than two meters. *Social distancing* is impossible on all these sidewalks. By contrast, flying is a domain of the rich that damages the climate. This, in addition to climate

policy considerations, makes it problematic if airlines are supported unconditionally with taxpayer money in the hundreds of millions of Euros.

Which social groups fly how often has been recorded in detail in Great Britain for decades: While the poorer half of the population on average accounts for half a flight per year, the frequency increases with income and for the richest five percent is at more than 3.5 flights. For many years, just barely a majority of Brits consistently negates the question: "Did you fly last year?" The rising market share of low-cost airlines thus did not "democratize" air travel, as has been argued frequently. Economical ticket prices simply cause *frequent flyers* to sit in an airplane even more often. In general, the richest tenth of all British households causes three times as much in greenhouse gas emissions as the poorest tenth. But when only transport emissions are taken into account, the factor increases to between 7 and 8. A similar picture emerges in Austria: In general, the household expenses of the richest tenth of the population are two and half times above those of the poorest tenth. In terms of the cost of vacations, this shear is increased to five-and-a-half-fold! The frequency of travel and the tendency to fly increase with income and educational level. A poll by VCÖ [Transport Club Austria] from 2017 also confirms the British data for Austria: According to the poll, a third of the population never flies. Half fly once a year or less, while only a sixth sits in an airplane several times a year.

Ecological aspects are added to these social ones to explain why strict conditions should be attached to support for the airline industry. That is so because the current crisis of the airline industry should be understood as an opportunity for climate policy, that is, for an urgently needed structural change towards climate-friendly mobility.

According to forecasts, the proportion of CO₂ emissions due to airline travel is expected to increase dramatically over the next few years, unless political countermeasures are taken. Short-haul flights are a disaster in terms of climate policy. An airplane emits about forty times more greenhouse gases per passenger than an ÖBB [Austrian Federal Railways] train on the same route, according to calculations by the Umweltbundesamt [[Environment Agency Austria](#)].

The future of the airline industry must be clearly linked to alignment with the 1.5-degree goal of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, to which Austria committed, as well.

This would also be consistent with the European Green Deal, which the new president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, proposed last December. According to that deal, greenhouse gas emissions by the transport sector are to be reduced by 90 percent by 2050. Here air travel, at almost 15 percent of emissions across Europe, plays a central role. To accomplish that goal, the entire European transport system must be structured in a more environmentally friendly manner.

This means for the current discussions: Public funding for the airline industry in connection with the Corona crisis should be linked to specific conditions.

1. In return for supporting AUA [Austrian Airlines], the republic [of Austria] should receive a blocking minority of shares; this would, for one, ensure a desirable business policy in terms of social and climate policy and, for the other, let the republic benefit from future profits. The state and other stakeholders should develop

joint strategies for the planned dismantling of airline companies and/or promote their conversion to transport service providers.

2. Unbridled liberalization in the airline industry leads to ruinous competition with many losers: The airlines are left with low margins, and are forced to save. For passengers this means worse service, for employees, worse working conditions. The latter, in particular, must be improved again, because social dumping is currently the lay of the land in the airline industry. Ryanair (= Laudamotion [Austrian low-cost airline]) is a particularly frightening example of this. An aid package must also be used to secure or improve affected employees' income. Thus, the time of low-cost airlines would be over for good.
3. At the same time, the extensive tax-exemptions in airline travel should be removed. According to WIFO [Austrian Institute for Economic Research], the Austrian state loses half a billion Euros a year as a result. An appreciable increase of the airplane ticket fee and introduction of a kerosene tax would be first steps in that direction.
4. Already immediately after the Corona crisis, short-haul flights on routes where good train connections already exist should not be allowed to be offered. Three of the four destinations from Wien-Schwechat airport [Vienna airport] with the most passengers – that is, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Zürich – can already now be reached with several direct trains a day. In the medium term, flights within Europe must also be significantly reduced and at the same time massive investments in the European train network must be made.
5. The Corona crisis offers a unique opportunity to rethink how things are done in society. If we act responsibly now and employees are offered climate-friendly workplaces, we can achieve the necessary reduction in airplane travel. Re-trainings could already start during

the current lock-down situation.

The political goal must be a climate-friendly transport sector. To achieve this, a drastic reduction of airplane travel in Europe and across the world is necessary. However, this does not limit the freedom to travel, but only the “*license to destroy the climate*” that a small group of people who fly a lot believes it has.

The point is to create a way of economic activity and living in which not so many goods are flown around the globe, businesspeople don't jet around so much and the weekend trip from Vienna to Barcelona with a low-cost airline is no longer possible. Even the lobbyists for the airline industry must understand this.

Dr. Heinz Högelsberger and Univ.-Prof. Ulrich Brand currently work on a research project about the role of employees and trade unions in social-ecological restructuring which is funded by the Austrian climate and energy fund.

**2016 Overcoming the
Development Imperative and**

Fostering Alternatives

by Ulrich Brand

Given the highly uneven dynamics of global capitalism and the constantly occurring crises in many regions of the world, the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Brussels Office, invited to a first meeting to enhance a transnational exchange of global and local problems as well as resistances and alternatives.

Under the header “Beyond the development imperative”, political activists and critical scholars met in January 2016 for three days (with Ashish Kothari, Kalpavriksh, India, and Ulrich Brand, Vienna University, Austria, as initiators) in order to start a dialogue among possibilities to overcome the so powerful and in many respects exclusive capitalist development imperative – an imperative that is at the same time productive and destructive that creates material well-being for many people but at enormous socio-economic, political and ecological costs and by excluding many others and destroying their livelihoods. “Development” and “economic growth” go still hand in hand and their common denominator is that capitalist dynamics are assumed to solve most problems like a “magic bullet”, and in light of the ecological crisis as supposedly “green” development and growth.

The Global Working Group Beyond Development heavily questions these assumptions and related practices. It started in January with 23 people from 16 countries and with a strong presence of the international offices of the Foundation. It intends to prepare the ground for a solid transnational cooperation, i.e. to share experiences, to reflect own practices in light of

others in order to strengthen own forces. The group explicitly did not want to start with the elaboration of common strategies but focused in its first meeting more on creating mutual understanding, trust and the desire to cooperate for some years together – a necessary and inspiring process.

Additionally, the group members were aware that they are in no way “representatives” of their continents. RLS Brussels invited them because all of them are politically close to the Foundation, are knowledgeable in specific issues and are experienced and inspiring for work in collaborative ways. However, the strength of the group is in its diversity and the engagement of the members to contribute to radical emancipatory change in their countries, regions and worldwide, i.e. to a comprehensive social-ecological transformation. Moreover, RLS already started [regional groups in Latin America](#) and [Southeast Asia](#) with some personal overlaps. The Global Working Group will cooperate closely with those and other processes.

The discussions in Brussels were organised around several questions and axes:

- What the group members would like to understand better from each other and what is to be shared from the respective experiences in different regions?
- What can be learned from existing experiences of collaboration: what are key factors for a good way to work together and good collaboration?
- What are agreements and elements of a work program for a global working group that not repeats the work that is done elsewhere?

The three days showed that such an exchange is incredibly fruitful and bears a great analytical and political potential. The group members from Africa and Asia, for instance, indicated the need to know more about debates in Latin America about resource extractivism and alternatives to it. Moreover, it became clear that any discussion about alternatives needs to be sensitive of colonial legacies that are – also among emancipatory forces – still present. The mapping of important concrete alternatives and conflicts is taking place elsewhere, see e.g. [EJOLT](#), but the group could re-interpret them in light of the question how to overcome the global development and growth imperative and how to create and foster alternatives.

It became clear that there is an urgent need to reflect on own experiences in the respective regions and countries and that this might benefit from experiences elsewhere: For example, the relationship between state, political parties and movements, the role of private corporations, important conflicts and discourses for alternatives, the meaning of democracy and socialism.

A cross-cutting issue was to know more about the role of the EU in different regions and about China's role, especially in Africa and Latin America. Another topic was where and whether the distinction of a political "left" and "right" is still useful and how to draw upon socialist experiences of states, parties, trade unions and movements. A major point was that, in contrast to many Latin American debates and their insistence on commonalities, it does not make sense to talk in a general way about "Africa" or "Asia" or "Europe".

One debate was about the role of imaginaries, utopias and "futures" for radical change. Liberal and conservative forces present all the time studies and "flagship reports" on future

prospects, i.e. how the world might look like in the year 2030 or 2050. They intend to influence current debates about what to do in order to achieve certain futures (e.g. a carbon-free economy) and to avoid others like accelerating climate change. What are emancipatory approaches to these dynamic and powerful processes of “futuring”?

Of course, the productivity of such a group lies in the possibility to reflect globally – this is at the same time a danger when the unevenness of discussions and experiences is not considered. The group managed this tension quite well but it needs to be reflected constantly.

This is also the case for feminist perspectives – on current global dynamics as well as on alternatives – that were very present at the first meeting and should remain a strong focus in the future. Not by chance, the group detected as a possible common denominator to think emancipatory politics as a contribution to just and ecologically sustainable forms of social-ecological reproduction. Such a reproduction should consider processes beyond the formal market and wage-labour and question the development and growth imperative that is today forcefully organising social-ecological reproduction around the world.

Concepts as “(neo-)extractivism” or “[imperial mode of living](#)” might make us better understand the global and highly uneven functioning of capitalism; notions like „good living for all“ (buen vivir, ubuntu, swaraj) or “social-ecological transformation” might be interesting perspectives for alternatives. However, the group was also hesitant to universalising claims and left it as an open debate.

Experiences from other undertakings showed that to start such a group means to build trust, to trust in diversity and to acknowledge differences, but at the same time to identify common political interests. Such a group needs a transparent exchange of information and non-hierarchical learning processes as well as new methods without an overload of work because the members are already engaged in many other things. It is important to ensure a certain continuity and infrastructure. Such a group works when everybody feels respected and gets political and personal surplus.



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At the end of the three days, the group agreed to continue and enhance its work. Sub-groups on several topics were formed; it was agreed upon more exchange among African, Asian and Latin American actors, for instance, a delegation from China to Latin America is planned as a concrete step. Its specific contribution will be to bring together critical debates on the development imperative at a global scale, to get an

understanding what really occurs politically in different regions with respect to the development imperative, and to contribute to overcome regional but also global obstacles for alternatives. Thanks to the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels, the group disposes over an excellent infrastructure for such an important endeavour and will probably meet again beginning of 2017.

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Publications:

[Más alla del desarrollo / Beyond Development](#)

Latin American regional working group “Alternativas al Desarrollo”/ Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Andean Office, Quito

[Socioecological Transformations](#)

Journal für Entwicklungspolitik/Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Brussels Office