

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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Ulrich Brand is professor of international policy at Vienna University. He is a member of the organizing committee of the “Degrowth Conference 2020. Strategies for Social-Ecological Transformation” taking place from May 29 to June 1st, 2020 in Vienna. His forthcoming book with Verso is *The Imperial Mode of Living. On the Exploitation of Human Beings and Nature in Global Capitalism* (co-authored with Markus Wissen).