

SOLIDARITY FOREVER

TALKING TRANSITION WITH TRADE UNIONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
PHILIPPE POCHE
BY **LAURENT
STANDAERT**

Far bigger than parties and more organised than activists, trade unions remain among the most powerful political forces in Europe today. Any successful transition to a sustainable future, for workers and for the planet as a whole, will need them firmly on board. Philippe Pochet, from the European Trade Union Institute, discusses how the ambitions of the trade union movement are evolving and the promises that lie in alliances with Greens.

LAURENT STANDAERT: The question of the future of work seems to be back on the agenda today. What is the state of the debate and reflection within the European trade union movement?

PHILIPPE POCHE: From the point of view of the unions, the discussion on the future of the work can be summed up in a key idea: the need for a transition. A new world is taking shape, as much in terms of climate change as of digitalisation. What shifts are needed to avoid workers losing out? Luca Visentini, Secretary General of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), said in early 2018 that it is necessary to think about a European transition fund, similar to the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund but more substantial, for the next seven-year budget of the European Union. European trade unions in recent years, even decades, have certainly put a strong emphasis on the climate, notably through the concept of ‘just transition’ and at the United Nations’ annual climate summits. But this reflection and the need to support the transition have become even more profound in light of the digital question. At the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) we have a Foresight Unit, for which resolving climate change and the digital question are a priority. In the trade union world, there is a consensus on the fact that we face a significant transition. While nobody knows

the exact destination, we nevertheless need to anticipate what lies ahead with a serious, grand-scale approach.

Are national trade unions also leading the way on climate change and technology?

PHILIPPE POCHE: It varies from one country to another. On the climate issue for example, there is a strong consensus within the European trade union family, apart from perhaps a few Polish trade unions. The difficulty is that we are just beginning to emerge from a decade of austerity. Before the 2008 crisis, there was quite a strong momentum around ‘transition’ issues. The crisis and the Barroso Commission era provided the opportunity for a general attack on workers’ rights, union rights, and trade union institutions. The situation forced the unions to defend the basics – their achievements, the progress they have made, and their members – and also to focus on essentials in terms of their reflection: salary schemes and inequality. The crisis is not over, but spaces for dialogue appear to be opening up, on the climate among other areas, after having been shelved for a long time.

If we look at the climate issue, there are two levels: a discursive level and a more concrete one. Some interesting declarations have been made by key institutions at the global level, such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). But this does

not involve negotiations or partners with real influence. At the level of the ETUC and the European trade union federations, and then at the level of the national federations, declarations have a real impact. The case of the chemical industrial sector is telling: their focus is on employment in the sector and is certainly less ambitious than the international level on climate issues, but their impact is tangible and their objectives are realistic and negotiated.

On robotisation, the trade union IG Metall in Germany is carrying out one of the most extensive and realistic studies on the automotive industry, on the transition from combustion to electric vehicles, and the impact in terms of employment. The abstract discussions at the global level are necessary, but this transition must be thought of in the real world of industry and employment. The European level is not more ‘advanced’ than the national level, they complement one another, simply because the industry and workers have an interest in doing so, as the German example shows.

Before looking forward to transition, what is the situation in the European labour market?

PHILIPPE POCHE: The two real problems of the labour market at the European level up until now have been division and non-convergence. Just 10 to 15 years ago, it was

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still thought that all EU countries would converge. This has not happened. The chosen model ended in failure: little solidarity and competition between national labour markets which saw workers ultimately squeezed as 'costs'. This model was vigorously pursued by the Barroso Commission which breached the tacit agreement that "the market operates at the European level and the welfare state protects at the national level" to the benefit of the market across the board. The situation led to forced mobility for some and to the rise of populism for others. How do you tell workers in the East that they will earn 350 euros per month and on top of that receive a pension of 150 euros? With no prospects, the result was the displacement of workers without proper protections in place and without any reflection on a social Europe.

Along the same lines, the recent developments on the posted workers directive are interesting because they signal a realisation that change needs to happen and that the current model – never truly thought of as a common project – is bankrupt. Today the European Union offers no vision. It has imposed macroeconomic constraints upon itself and completely left aside the meso-economic level, that of production, division of labour, and specialisations among states. If we want to talk about transition, we can't keep pursuing this 'low-cost' model that lacks objectives or strategic vision. Similarly, the recent discussions under the Juncker Commission of a renewal of the 'social pillar' have some promise, even if relatively vague at this stage. Nevertheless, we can see a dialogue on a medium-term strategy emerging, in which Europe would protect but also project itself as a force for industry and research.

To make the necessary transition(s) a reality, you speak of the need for alliances between Green and trade union movements.

PHILIPPE POCHE: There are two elements that seem essential to me. The first is the importance of collective actors for a broad change that is stable and sustainable. I think that Greens, for the most part, have



an overly individualistic perspective when it comes to change. It is laudable and important that people eat less meat, cycle more, and so forth. But the question of scale is crucial here. Collective actors are key to ensure the sustainability of any transition, certainly in the face of challenges such as climate change. Among the major institutions of the 19th century – churches, political parties, and trade unions – it is unions that remain the most present and active, with around 40 million members in Europe. Secondly, we need to steer the discourse of transition away from ‘experts’. Eloi Laurent, with whom I co-authored an essay on the eco-social transition, reminds us that telling people we’re headed for catastrophe and “we told you so” does not help to mobilise citizens and voters. A stance that says “we are right, but we are 5 per cent of the population” will get us nowhere. Changing society takes time, it requires groups to form alliances. Paradigm shifts happen but never in the short term, and nobody knows when the tipping point will be.

These elements are important because change requires more than majorities. A short-term majority made up of Leftists and Greens, for example, is not safe from the likes of Trump, who can unravel everything. In such cases, the question of substantive and long-term change remains open. Alliances must be built beyond electoral calculations and the only tool that works for that is deliberation:

dialogue and efforts over a long period to build strong consensuses and the willingness to discuss differences. To take an example from the private sector, the business with the most interest in, and expertise on, climate change are insurance companies. Yet many progressives will not speak to insurers because they belong to ‘a different world’.

Can you give concrete examples of these alliances?

PHILIPPE POCHE: To unite as widely as possible doesn’t necessarily require a long and detailed programme of demands. On the contrary, what’s needed are a few strategic points liable to gradually win over the greatest possible number. It is a complex task because opposition to change can sometimes be head-on. We can take the route of ‘consensus tables’ and ‘conflict tables’.

An interesting example in the area of climate change is that of the cooperation between the Trade Union Congress in the UK and Greenpeace, who have set out their points of consensus and their differences in a single document, on issues such as carbon capture. Another is the work of [MEP and Greens/EFA co-chair] Philippe Lamberts with the Belgian trade unions, the ETUC, and the ETUI, around opening up a dialogue for post-growth or degrowth discussions with EU Commission officials and other stakeholders.

In all cases, we must provide opportunities for workers and their environments and families, and not simply say, “You are the past.”

The experience of the transition out of the coal sector in Western Europe teaches us this lesson and the significant costs attached to it. How can we provide workers with prospects and suitable alternatives? The sorting and recycling sector is a

very telling example. It is in full growth but the working conditions are terrible. The issues of quality of employment as well as health and safety at work are points around which dialogue can be constructed, and where the parties can see their principles and values defended.

In the medium term, what should be the priorities for such collaboration between ecologists and trade unions?

PHILIPPE POCHE: There are a lot of areas of potential convergence. It seems to me that the overarching question for many of the discussions is that of inequalities. To take the example of quality of employment: someone who works in a company with poor health and safety conditions is often also the one who lives near the motorway or in unenviable environmental conditions. The relatively large

overlap between social and environmental injustice has been clearly shown to exist.

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We shouldn't downplay the complexity of the task, however. A better redistribution of wealth will not automatically bring about a decrease in CO₂ emissions. If there is a better redistribution and everyone goes on holidays to the south of

Europe with Ryanair, the overall result is likely to be disappointing. But don't people seek certain elements of quality rather than mass consumption? If redistribution means better access to high-quality public services such as nurseries, and if as a society we chart where we are headed, the environmental results will be within reach too.

In the very short term though, I personally do not see any alternative to a regulated Green capitalism. I think that is the only way to speed up the technological development necessary for transitions, and for us then to be able to move on to a different phase. We need businesses and entrepreneurs – for example in places that aren't very Green, such as Texas, where we're seeing the strongest growth in the production of solar and wind energy – that invest in renewable energy and increase its capacity. Unless everyone stops

consuming, I don't see an alternative in the short term, because the social forces needed aren't present, let alone in the majority.

Are Greens too dogmatic or rigid to move forward in alliances?

PHILIPPE POCHE: There have been many successful collaborations between Green and labour movements. But ultimately, ecologist movements represent a kind of enlightened middle class. It has the means to ensure its intellectual comfort and with a certain discourse on a transition, which has largely remained confined within its circles, it has made it difficult to strike up dialogue with the world of work. In my view, now is the time to return to a discussion that has never really taken place around the stereotypes that each has in relation to the other, and to get back to the basics on the issues of equality, work, and transition. The unions are movements that defend workers and their interests. This does not mean that unions do not defend the interests of the poorest and those outside the world of wage employment, but it allows for cooperation free of ambiguity. Cooperation is about 'getting people to work together' even if they don't have the same interests nor represent the same groups. My feeling is that sometimes Greens want to represent everyone and no one at once, which is not always conducive to the clarity needed for cooperation. ■



PHILIPPE POCHE

is general director of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), professor at the Université catholique de Louvain, and associated researcher at the Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work (CRIMT, Montreal). Prior to joining ETUI in 2008, he was director of the Observatoire Social Européen for 16 years.