

# THREE FUTURES FOR TRADE UNIONS IN 2049

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Climate change and digitalisation will shape the 21st century, but society's ability to determine the future should not be downplayed. How social movements such as trade unions, business groups, and political parties adapt to these trends will be pivotal in constructing the social model of the decades to come.

Thinking about the world in 2049 means imagining how society will be shaped by the two long-term trends that worry citizens today in 2019: climate change and the digital transformation of the economy that some refer to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. At first glance, these trends appear to present separate challenges: the first is external and imposed by nature, while the second is internal and caused by our rewiring of production processes. We might, then, try to find solutions for cutting greenhouse emissions, on the one hand, and mitigating the social impacts of the digitalised economy, on the other. Strangely, these are seen as challenges to be tackled simultaneously but discretely, without any common narrative.<sup>1</sup>

But the roots of these twin challenges lie in the same reality: namely industrialisation, the original cause of climate change and the driver for successive waves of 'revolutions' in production patterns. So, in both cases, there is just one question to which we must find an answer: how do we transform this industrial model so that it creates wealth (Which wealth? How much?) without destroying the

environment and social cohesion? Because, over a 200-year period of continuous growth and development, this model has never shown itself capable of functioning without the massive extraction and consumption of natural resources, and without an equally colossal generation of waste. Casting an eye forward to 2049 thus means considering the future of the industrial model, including agricultural production and international trade.

The first scenario is that of path dependence.<sup>2</sup> In other words: 2049 will reflect the sum of decisions made in the past, in this case, low climate ambitions, diplomatic conflicts, the decisive influence of industry lobbies, the continued widening of social inequality, polarisation, and so on. In short, 2049 will see today's industrial model continue to hold sway across the planet due to political weakness (and often complicity) and the enormity of profit at stake, without us ever managing to curb its negative externalities, except perhaps at the margin. The planet will gradually descend into socio-climatic chaos from which only a small minority will be spared.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Pochet (2017). *Concilier deux futurs. Notes de prospectives*, #3. Brussels: ETUI.

Increasingly authoritarian governments will prioritise competitiveness and, above all, maintaining the existing model in the name of vested interests. This scenario may seem completely irrational, but many “sleepwalkers”, to recall Christopher Clark’s causes of the First World War metaphor,<sup>3</sup> are tirelessly working on it: short-sighted political classes, entrenched lobbies, pro-business governments prepared to pay any price for decimal upticks in growth, investors willing to do anything for obscene returns, multinationals obsessed with maximising shareholder value and executive pay. Sleepwalkers who are reckless at best, criminal at worst.

A second scenario would see the industrial model adapted to meet the challenges of fighting climate change and maintaining social cohesion. It is the scenario of poorly named ‘green capitalism’, or rather social eco-industrialism: a combination of industrial production that generates profit for shareholders but also respects the environment and strengthens social justice. We will, supposedly, be on the cusp of this scenario by 2020: sustainable production, renewable energy, recycling and a circular economy. But despite there being near consensus, this vision remains improbable given that the industrial model has yet to prove it can reconcile these three imperatives and given that imbalances have almost always been resolved in favour of profit. To date, neither wind nor solar energy, nor the concepts of sustainable development and circular economy have managed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which continue to rise as GDP grows.<sup>4</sup> The only periods that have seen a worldwide reduction in greenhouse gas emissions have been those marked by economic recession: there have been just two of these since 2000. That is why this scenario looks unlikely today.

The third scenario envisages the collapse of the industrial model. Several factors could trigger this: an unprecedented global financial crisis and an irreversible economic shift as investment dries up; a world

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2 Paul Pierson (2000). Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 94(2), pp.251-267.

3 Christopher Clark (2012). *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. New York: Penguin Books.

4 International Energy Agency (2018). *Global Energy & CO<sub>2</sub> Status Report 2017*. Available at <[www.iea.org/geco](http://www.iea.org/geco)>

energy crisis and spike in oil prices rendering the operation of machinery and the transport of goods exorbitant; prolonged downturns and social and political crises. The end of a model which, as the 2020s approach, would be accompanied by the rapid development of a series of alternatives that are already in their infancy today: a revival of producer cooperatives, the commons, energy democracy and local currencies, and the spread of open-source and peer-to-peer models, replacing the technology oligopolies that emerged at the turn of the 21st century.

Faced with the scenarios sketched out above, what does the future hold for unions in 2049? To answer this question, we must first look at the industrial model on which unions' foundations lie. Their fate depends on the future of this model. Yet, in the three scenarios we have looked at, unions enjoy a number of different possibilities.

The first – and gloomiest from a union point of view – would be for unions to simply disappear. In an increasingly polarised society, their members and legitimacy as representative stakeholders could be lost in a profoundly changed and insecure world of work. Or, alternatively, unions could become unwilling accomplices in a destructive model dependent on increasingly authoritarian forms of government to maintain growth.

The second would see their role paradoxically strengthened by the need, in the name of maintaining social peace, to tackle preoccupations with both the 'end of the month' and the 'end of the world', as alluded to by the *gilets jaunes* protests in France of 2018 and 2019. This scenario, which requires the building of new alliances, is a tall order as it involves reconciling social imperatives (jobs, working conditions, purchasing power, social and territorial cohesion), climate imperatives (cutting greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to climate changes, protecting against extreme weather) and industrial imperatives (transforming production processes, reducing natural resource use, reducing freight, increasing recycling and moderating consumption). Is this feasible? Can the industrial model adapt to social and environmental constraints on its development? In theory, yes. No structural obstacles stand in the way. But the greatest difficulty with this scenario lies in persuading the world's economic, financial, and political elites. For them, it would represent a paradigm shift. Achieving this goal would require a powerful alliance of socio-economic stakeholders, environmentalists, and citizens able to chart a course and leverage their strength. Losing this battle would mean victory for the previous scenario.

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<sup>5</sup> Albert O. Hirschmann (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The third option, the collapse of the industrial model, would either see unions replaced by new, more flexible and ad hoc forms of social organisation (the emergence of citizens' groups, for example), or manage to adapt their structures to a more local, more collective, more participatory world. Creating new alliances could allow unions to play a larger, revitalised role in new areas: collective wellbeing, health, new forms of social security, housing, training. This world is close to the cooperative ideal. Production would be reorganised based on the commons model in a tenable and democratic manner: open systems, resources that are shared and managed by the community, who set the rules of governance. This model would no longer be one of big multinationals and their subsidiaries but one of smaller units that self-organise into networks in the spirit of Basque group Mondragon.

These three options reflect the same set of choices as that suggested by economist Albert Hirschmann: a choice between loyalty, voice or exit.<sup>5</sup> Union loyalty towards a sleepwalking industrial model that may result in defeat, or worse, corruption. Or a wider, reinvigorated, vocal movement (voice) to guide and accelerate the shift towards a new eco-industrial model with a strong social dimension. Exit, lastly, would see the alliance between industrialisation and unionism broken for good and would transform the union movement into – or replace it with – other forms of collective organisations in a yet-to-be-invented post-industrial economic model.



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