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# Power Struggles: Green Energy's Missing Workers

**Article by Samir Jeraj**
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The share of renewables in Europe's energy production is growing slowly but surely. Yet as Europe races to build its green energy economy, the workers doing the building are too often facing weaker unions, unsafe conditions, and employers who resist collective bargaining. Without them on board, the transition can't achieve the social consent it depends on for its success. What would it take to make green jobs good jobs?

Europe is, slowly, moving along the transition to green energy. In 2025, just over9 per cent of the EU's electricity came from coal and in the first three months of 2026, close to half came from renewable sources.

For a continent that has repeatedly come face to face with the economic, security, and environmental risks of relying on fossil fuels, this transition is both urgent and crucial. However, the question of whether it is a "just transition" is still open, particularly when it comes to the rights of the workers who are being affected as Europe's economy shifts towards renewables.

Determining who falls into that group is not straightforward, as the green transition cuts across numerous sectors. "If you look at the standard statistical classification of activities, you don't have brown or black sectors and green sectors separately," says Bela Galgóczi, senior researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). Brown and black sectors commonly refer to carbon-intensive, polluting industries. While some workplaces – such as an oil refinery – might sit squarely in that category, chemical production and vehicle manufacturing are too complex to be put in a particular category, he notes.

However, the work done so far – often using imperfect data – tends to show that brown and black sectors have slightly higher wages and union density, greater coverage from collective bargaining agreements, and lower use of agency workers than green sectors. This is in part because these sectors have existed and workers have been organising for a century. "I would never suggest that for the wind sector we will need 100 years, or even 10 or 20. But there is a little bit of a build-up time for structures and representation and settlements," Galgóczi says.

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## Unscrupulous employers

The multinational companies active in Europe's green transition have tended to respond differently in each jurisdiction to protest action by their workers. For instance, in 2023, workers in Germany concluded

a 123-day strike, the last of a series of industrial actions, against their employer, the Danish renewables giant Vestas. The strike was in protest against the company's refusal to enter into a collective bargaining agreement with the workers' union – something that was and is standard practice in Denmark itself. The workers ultimately succeeded and established a collective bargaining agreement. Meanwhile, workers at electric vehicle manufacturer Tesla's Swedish subsidiary conceded defeat in August of this year following a three-year strike aimed at establishing a collective bargaining agreement.

Another pattern that has emerged in the behaviour of major players in the green industry, according to Galgóczi, are attempts to erode the pay, terms, and conditions of workers as part of company restructuring. In 2022, the state-owned French energy company EDF was forced to abandon a restructure named "Projet Hercule" that would have moved their renewables business into a new company, which was opposed by unions on the grounds that it would privatise a public service, and criticised by the European Commission over EU competition rules.

In the UK, North Sea oil still provides a significant number of well-paid and unionised jobs. But since production peaked in 1999, many have believed the future to lie in offshore wind. However, the workers' ability to participate in that future is not guaranteed. "Nobody ever speaks to renewable workers, and I think there's a massive missing piece of the jigsaw," says Connor Watt, worker organiser at Platform, an NGO working on the just transition. Watt and his colleagues have been talking to workers across oil, gas, and renewables, particularly those who have moved over from fossil fuels – usually in search of long-term job stability – about their experiences.

Many of these workers find that renewables projects are often more poorly managed and workplace accidents are more frequent, in part because safety practices have not been transferred from the oil and gas sector nor developed specifically for renewables. Watt points out that safety processes and union engagement were transformed in the North Sea oil and gas industry following the 1988 Piper Alpha disaster, where 167 workers died following a catastrophic explosion on an oil rig.

Watt feels the situation in renewables means a disaster is only a matter of time, particularly once workers are in international waters – a mere 12 miles from the British shore. "If you're just on a vessel at sea and it's not under a UK flag and you might just be waiting for weather or for a shout from somebody, there isn't any legislation which protects the vessel that you're on, and that's a common thing," he notes. In international waters, companies can exploit casualised migrant labour and pay less than minimum wage. "We've developed this massive [offshore wind] industry, second in the world. However, there are just these oversights in the regulations and legislation, so that's worrying," Watt adds.

## The missing link with workers

The problem has its roots in the tendency in European countries, including the UK, to prioritise greener industries even at the cost of workers' rights, terms, and conditions – a bargain that could undermine the transition itself.

"A lot of people who want renewable energy to be built, want it to be built quickly because of the urgency of the climate crisis, and so relatively few questions are asked about how it's built and the conditions under which that happens," says William Westgard-Cruice, a human geographer at the Clark University Graduate School of Geography.

He points to the construction of solar farms in Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, where in a number of cases workers' rights have been violated and where migrants have been hired to work under

harsh circumstances. “There’s a lot of focus on local communities and their concerns, and relatively little focus on the workers who are actually building and operating these power plants,” Westgard-Cruice adds.

One of the reasons why there is localised opposition to renewables projects, he believes, is that communities where they are built are not offered clear and defined benefits in the form of good and decent jobs. Moreover, he says that political parties from across the spectrum are failing to engage with these issues sufficiently, if at all.

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Westgard-Cruice believes that politicians can make an effective intervention by incorporating stronger labour protections into the auctions for offshore wind projects. At present, he explains, European countries are including measures around environmental sustainability and skills into these contracts, but they could go much further and mandate collective bargaining. There were, he adds, unsuccessful efforts on a European level by some MEPs to add protections into the Net-Zero Industry Act, but worker protection didn’t appear to be a “dealbreaker” for either the Greens or the Social Democrats – and certainly not for the European Commission.

Westgard-Cruice believes that unions, social and climate movements, as well as green, social-democratic and left parties must push for better working conditions and standards to be a much greater political priority and to use the power of the state to raise them in the renewables sector. “This is the only way that there’s going to be social consent for the development of renewable energy in rural areas that feel like they’re being turned into sacrifice zones,” he emphasises. “These political debates could have a very different character if people all knew someone who’s working in offshore wind, and who’s saying, ‘Oh, the conditions are great in here. I’m so glad that I left my old job in the fossil fuel industry to be able to go to this.’”

## The way forward

IndustriAll is a global trade union federation representing around 800 unions and 50 million workers worldwide. As a union focused on manufacturing, it sees a lot of potential for the green transition to generate new manufacturing jobs further down the supply chain.

Both IndustriAll and the ETUI are pushing for a just transition framework directive, says Corinna Zierold, head of just transition at IndustriAll Europe. This is because their experience of negotiating at the sector level has not been successful. For example, in 2022, IndustriAll started to negotiate a just transition agreement for gas workers at Eurogas, a European association representing the gas industry. However, after two years of talks aimed at reaching a voluntary agreement, Eurogas said it would not sign it.

That said, there are also positive examples, according to Zierold. For instance, Poland has established projects to retrain coal miners to work in wind power, which the country is aiming to expand to provide around a quarter of its energy. The UK and Scottish governments are also establishing projects to fund retraining of offshore oil and gas workers (however, this was before the announcement that the UK would grant permission for more gas production in the North Sea.).

IndustriAll's member unions are also facing pressure from employers, backed by right-wing governments. In Hungary, battery manufacturing plants stepped up hiring of migrant labour, with the support and facilitation of the government of far-right former prime minister Viktor Orbán. At the same time, workers were facing increased health and safety risks from exposure to toxic substances. Unions have continued to push for change since a new government came into power earlier this year.

There are also structural issues at work in the new green energy economy. "The net zero sectors are basically small businesses, and maybe some of them do manufacturing… I would put that under the general bundle of the installation economy," says Dr Nicholas Beuret, a lecturer in management and ecological sustainability at the University of Essex. According to Beuret, many green jobs are in assembling and installing rather than producing the components that go into key infrastructure like heat pumps or smart metres, so the full value of the green transition does not trickle down to workers.

"There's often a fraught relationship with working conditions, and not only are they [small installation businesses] at risk of going under themselves, and there's lots of competition, and then they're fighting larger businesses, but there's also quite a lot of underhanded economic behaviour that undermines the very conditions of green transition in itself," he laments. This includes, for example, installation companies fitting faulty insulation and defrauding green energy schemes.

The economic geopolitics of green energies is another factor, with European renewables manufacturing contending with China, which supplies 95 per cent of the solar panels used in Europe and manufactures 39 per cent of wind turbines installed outside the country. In the long term, this could relegate Europe to largely being a continent where solar panels, wind turbines, and other green technologies are assembled, while economic giants in China capture the value created through manufacturing.

Beuret also highlights the heavier dependence on government grants and support, which is a "really politicised revenue scheme". As he sees it, the larger problem is how policymakers are approaching the transition. "They're not interested in running public companies or public investment or public research," he says. "They want to incentivise businesses to do it, and the problem is the businesses they're trying to incentivise all have a lot of money to lose in fossil fuels."

As the backlash to green policies gathers across Europe, supporters of the transition to a green economy need to understand better how to bring workers on board – both in old industries that are in the process of transition and the new ones that are meant to provide better, greener jobs.

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