

Who can afford to back down?

About the authors and their positions

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Release date:
17.01.2017

<https://www.degrowth.de/en/dim/>

1. What is the key idea of trade unions?

A link to the past – socio-ecological transformation as part of trade union interest representation?

By international comparison, German trade unions are very strongly institutionalised and have exceptionally high membership levels. With 2.3 million and 2.0 million members respectively, IG Metall and ver.di have some of the largest memberships "among independent trade unions globally.

These and other trade unions, representing mainly employees, are frequently accused of tending to make extensive concessions to companies, particularly in times of economic crises, in order to secure their members' jobs and income. As such, they de facto assume the role of 'co-operative crisis management', which, as Klaus Dörre (2011, 278 f.) states, can have fatal consequences: „Despite, or possibly because of their incontestable successes in managing the crisis, the German unions are also in danger of becoming mere pressure group agencies." According to Dörre, such trade union policy is primarily about the wages and jobs of (core) employees in the individual sectors. This leads to the representation of particular employee interests which may also be in opposition to general societal interests such as ecological sustainability (Dörre 2011, 288).

Contrary to the assumption that unions dedicate themselves solely to securing income and jobs, unions have dealt with many socially important issues in the past. Since the beginning of the 1970s

Entgegen der Annahme, dass Gewerkschaften sich nur der Sicherung von Einkommen und Arbeitsplätzen widmen, sind in der Vergangenheit zahlreiche gesellschaftlich wichtige Themen von ihnen bewegt worden. Seit Anfang der 1970er Jahre finden sich

„the concerns of the anti-nuclear, international development, environmental and conservation movements, of advanced feminist thought and activism, environmental critique of technology, the

¹ We would like to thank Daniel Förste for inspiring the title.

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new alternative and cooperative economy, as well as various emancipation movements of social, ethnic and sexual minorities [...] have also been reflected in discussions at trade union conferences; these issues were prioritised by the trade union press and educational initiatives.” (Wiesenthal 2014, 402)

In light of the multiple crises at present, these debates are also beginning to reappear in trade unions’ current discussions and decisions. IG Metall, for example, has called for a „fundamental change of course. Our aims are qualitative growth and sustainable transformation of industrial production in order to create opportunities for future generations to have a ‘good life’” (Lemb 2015, 12). ver.di has similar priorities:

„In order to rally a majority behind ecological transformation and implement it, a concept is needed which both contributes to quality of life for the majority of people and promotes social and employment objectives. This requires an alternative economic policy, which is focused on qualitative, selective, socio-ecologically governed GDP growth. Therefore, the goal is a socio-ecological transformation.“ (ver.di 2011, 2)

2. Who is part of trade unions, what do they do?

Entrenched differences, ignored similarities

The conflict between jobs and the environment

There are still virulent disputes between trade unions on the one hand and environmental movements on the other. Both sides frequently criticise each other. Environmental movements accuse unions of refusing to include environmental issues in their policy as a matter of course. In part, there is indignation and incomprehension about „the“ trade unions which, for example, continue to promote environmentally damaging lignite mining in order to secure jobs. Against the backdrop of the wider environmental crisis and the associated criticism of economic growth, trade unions find it difficult for their involvement in a socio-ecological transformation of the economy to be accepted. Many of those who are critical of economic growth on environmental grounds consider trade unions to be both uncritical and powerful proponents of economic growth (see Reuter 2014, 555). Conversely, trade unions accuse the environmental movement and those involved in the degrowth movement of not taking any, or only little, account of the interests of employees or maintaining jobs in their political demands.

These reciprocal accusations often overlook the fact that there is an objective conflict between environmental, economic and social demands, which can be described as a „magic triangle“. „Magic“ because achieving one objective generally goes hand in hand with damaging another. It is difficult to meet all objectives equally. A solution will thus always have to be compro-

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missing in nature. Extracting fossil fuels, for example, both creates jobs and income in Germany and in many other countries, and simultaneously drives a process that is damaging to the environment. Globally, there are numerous examples of trade unions that are fighting alongside companies to maintain industries that are damaging to the environment, but these trade unions are also fighting to maintain the jobs and livelihoods of many people. This phenomenon is also described as the „jobs versus environment dilemma“ (Rätzl/Uzzell 2011). On the other hand, there are numerous examples of the environmental and degrowth movement broadly ignoring the negative social and employment impacts of their demands. One such example would be demanding the phasing out of industries that are damaging to the environment (see Felli 2014, 373).

Oppositions to the de- or post-growth perspective can also be observed in the historical development of trade unions: for example, key improvements in working conditions for the working population were once achieved in the coal and steel production. Today, trade unions are trying to prove their competence in modern environmentally friendly sectors such as the wind energy sector, and advocate for works councils and collective agreements. According to Dörre (2015, 248), a socio-ecological perspective for society as a whole would have to go beyond this and take the comprehensive transformation of production and way of life into account. It would also revitalise the trade union discussion on what constitutes a good life, considering socio-ecological factors.

3. How do you see the relationship between trade unions and Degrowth?

Seeking solutions: A socio-ecological way of life as a shared reference point

The search for solutions to the socio-ecological crisis frequently involves aiming to introduce policy measures to curb growth. These range from tax incentives to production bans. A further important dimension involves the (re-)shaping of our current way of life, based on the uninhibited exploitation of nature and fossil fuels in particular. From the degrowth perspective, changing one's way of life is of central importance. The so-called „Wirtschaftswunder“ („economic miracle“) in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s fuelled the creation of new consumption standards and value patterns (see Görg 2003, 129). In the past, of course, employees also profited from the wealth generated by economic growth. But this hegemonic way of life in the global north depends on environmental destruction and the exploitation of workers in the global south via global value-added chains (Brand/Wissen 2011).

The term „way of life“ raises the question of what it now means to have a good life and how this can be approached as a socio-political phenomenon.

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For this, one needs a new understanding of wealth (for a broad picture see Deutscher Bundestag 2013). In the de- and post-growth-movement, for example, how we organise our time plays an important role. The intention is to counteract somewhat the accelerated „temporal structures in the modern world“ (Rosa 2005) by developing societal forms of collaboration, which both give more space to the quality of human life in terms of leisure and free time, and promote more environmentally appropriate ways of life. Quality of life should no longer be assessed in purely monetary terms, that is, based on one’s bank balance or level of consumption. In trade union circles too, positions in which wealth is no longer solely measured in terms of income are increasingly common. However, the struggle for wage justice also makes environmental sense, as in this way, for example, consumption patterns can be diverted more towards quality and “being”, and less towards having.

These are not new issues. German trade unions considered the subject of the good life and the environmental consequences of the production of goods and services early on. As early as 1972, IG Metall held an international conference with the title “Aufgabe Zukunft: Verbesserung der Lebensqualität” („Task for the future: improving quality of life“), which was documented in ten conference volumes (IG Metall 1972; see Wiesenthal 2014, 403). However, these early humane and environmental approaches to far-reaching social policy and transformation were pushed into the background by the political and economic developments of the ensuing decades. In particular, economic crisis situations have repeatedly pushed the importance of maintaining jobs and income to the forefront.

Social situations determine one’s perception of the good life

So far, responding to the environmental crisis has primarily remained a matter for relatively well-off or educated circles. The degrowth perspective is also popular in these circles. As a result of this, an understanding of the situation of other social groups is often lost. For many, the prefix „eco-“ remains more an insult and „de- and post-growth“ an esoteric debate that has little to do with everyday life. In a society which is based on paid work and orientated towards social advancement, people generally only adopt conscious, socio-ecological ways of life if they have decided to do this voluntarily and on the basis of a relatively secure economic situation (see Voswinkel 2013; Noll/Weick 2014). Those lower on the social and wealth ladder want to climb further up first. Generally, only people who have reached a certain level of wealth are willing and able to consider and implement fundamental changes in behaviour, which can also include doing without.

A trade union perspective can help ensure that socio-ecological issues do not remain the concern of only the relatively wealthy and educated, but instead promote engagement at every level of society. This affects, for

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example, energy production and supply, a policy area in which the conflict between the economy and the environment is particularly evident. As long as employees have no alternative employment prospects, the trade unions' focus must be on maintaining jobs. This means protection of the environment and global climate justice issues are reduced to a secondary issue. Conversely, those motivated by environmental concerns tend to ignore employment concerns. They vehemently demand an immediate withdrawal from coal mining, while the futures of those employed in and in relation to these industries are, at best, treated as a side issue. In case of doubt, the problem tends to be suppressed and tolerated as „collateral damage“ for resolving the environmental matter.

Constructive discussions about wage labour in the face of the socio-ecological crisis are needed. Firstly, this is of strategic relevance. Because, after all, trade unions are a vital, influential ally on the path towards socio-ecological transformation. Secondly, however, this is also about the important interests that unions represent: a long as people are not in possession of assets, they are dependent on their income from work. This banal truth and its consequences are often ignored by those motivated by environmental concerns, as well as by critics of capitalism. They are, to some extent, blind to social issues.

It can generally be assumed that the stated positions are known to the actors involved in the debate. However, it can be observed that trade unions, critics of capitalism and environmentalists frequently only focus on specific elements. They frequently pursue their own particular political strategies and targets, often do not take each other seriously, and feel misunderstood by one another. This leads them to pursue primarily social or environmental interests. A necessary balance of interests does not occur as a result.

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

Reshaping production and one's way of life: Just transitions for all!

An emancipatory perspective in the discourse on environmental issues and a good life for all must be based on the analysis that environmental issues often go hand in hand with social issues, and that conversely, social issues always have environmental components. This is seen, for example, in the discourse on lignite strip mining in Germany: The mining and burning of lignite is not only a threat to the livelihoods of people in the global south. For many people, mining means that the region that they feel connected to is being destroyed, and yet are dependent on these polluting industries at the same time. If lignite is no longer mined, it is not only the miners who become unemployed; there is also the risk of a domino effect resulting in the economic decline of entire regions. In this conflict situation, trade unions

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are sometimes heavily criticised for their employment concerns. However, successes in the battle for sustainable energy supply remain limited without trade union participation, that is, they are restricted to the environment policy area with the risk of significant social „collateral damage“. A solution-oriented approach ought to advocate structural transformation that takes social and environmental factors into account.

The key task for unions and people from the environmental and de- and post-growth movement should be to actively work towards reducing the conflict between environmental and workers' movements. This would mean, for example, involving employees who are dependent on mining or other production methods that are damaging to the environment in strategies for socio-ecological transformation as part of a comprehensive policy concept. Experiences in other areas of the world show that labour policy struggles can be in harmony with environmental aims.

Trade unions have played an important role in the development of environmental policies in industrial countries around the world in the past century. Health and safety issues in the workplace have often resulted in alliances with community-based movements (see Felli 2014, 373 f.). Among other places, there are examples in the USA of how environmental and social issues can be linked. There, trade union and environmental actors are collaborating within the „Just Transition“ framework. When scaling down polluting or carbon-intensive industries, both environmental interests and worker demands are taken into consideration. The social inequality that makes its mark in areas with industries that are damaging the environment is also part of the political discussions: Who lives close to industries that are damaging to health and who can afford to live in the countryside? It is not just workers who are affected by industries that damage the environment but also the –primarily poorer– people who live in the regions in question.

Politicians and trade unions must aim to create good employment opportunities while also ensuring that jobs are designed so as to not create (lasting) environmental damage. Without doubt, this does not apply to many jobs today. It is not only that workers (e.g. in the services industry) suffer from enormous work pressure and increasing working hours: there are also many jobs, particularly in mining or the nuclear industry, which are an extreme burden to the environment. The solution cannot be to ignore the needs of the workers and simply close the works. Instead, fair transitions must be created, which promote alternative jobs and income sources. What these transitions look like and what they should lead to must be discussed by all affected with the involvement of politicians. Generally, the removal or restructuring of damaging, unsustainable jobs should not be seen as an individual problem for those employed there, but as a challenge to be solved with the participation of society at large. To this end, society as a whole must take responsibility if works are closed for good environmental reasons, for

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example, and people become unemployed as a result.²

The de- or post-growth perspective can encourage trade union representatives to reconsider their understanding of interest representation: Do trade unions see themselves as working for far-reaching socio-ecological transformation? If they do, this would involve alliances with social movements. As such, the focus on both trade union policy and socio-ecological transformation policy should not just be on particular companies and associated industries. Employee living conditions must also be included, taking into account such questions as: What should be done about the fine dust particles produced by lignite strip mining, which impact the health of employees and local residents? Is it in the workers' interests when entire towns, and thus entire social networks, disappear? The transformation of production and one's way of life involves environmental protection and the maintenance of the quality of life in the social sphere, as well as good, health-related and environmental working conditions.

One tool for at least reducing both environmental, and social and economic problems is the organisation of working time. Here, trade union traditions are aligned with the de- and post-growth perspective. The call for more free time, which individuals may freely choose to use for leisure or for caring for family and friends, is a prominent demand both from those who fall under the banner of the de- or post-growth movement and (again) increasingly from trade unions. It is becoming more and more clear that a fixation on formal salaried work is insufficient. New working time models are currently being discussed by trade unions and politicians.³ It is increasingly clear that in order to implement changes in the economy, and to secure and increase wealth in a broader sense, more time resources are needed –especially by those who actually produce the economic output. This affects the activities of the services and industry sector, as well as care work. Here, discussions on a societal level are needed to establish what, how, how many and where we want to produce and consume, in light of the socio-ecological crisis and with regard to enjoying a good life against a background of growing abundance.

One means of driving forward socio-ecological transformation is strengthening the principle of co-determination within companies and developing it

² The chairman of the union IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (IGBCE – Industrial Union for Mining, Chemistry and Energy), Michael Vassiliadis, has, for example, proposed a private fund, financed with profits, to secure the socially responsible withdrawal from lignite mining long-term. The fund should also finance the regeneration of mining areas.

³ The German party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, for example, is currently discussing a new working time model as part of its programme „Politik für mehr Zeit – Damit Erwerbsarbeit besser in unser Leben passt“ („Policy for more time – so that paid work fits life better“). An SPD project group has published a dialogue paper entitled “Neue Zeit – Arbeits- und Lebensmodelle im Wandel” („New time – changing working and life models“). ver.di has proposed a new working hours model, which combines reduced working hours for full-time employees with extended working hours for part-time employees via additional paid „Verfügungstage“ („availability days“) (ver.di 2015).

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further towards an economic democracy. In this way, socially and environmentally sound approaches to production could not only be raised and discussed with those affected, but direct practical consequences could also be drawn. Hans-Jürgen Urban, a board member at IG Metall, considers setting the course for fundamental economic change to be a key element of social transformation. According to Urban, this primarily includes making production, consumption and distribution more environmentally friendly; secondly, it involves a new system of distribution of income, assets and social opportunities; and thirdly, it involves the democratisation of business decisions and structures (see Urban 2014, 79). These points can be seen as an agenda for the debate between unions and the de- or post-growth movement.

Trade unions traditionally have a rich experience and expertise when it comes to the implementation of political demands. In the de- and post-growth movement, the focus is on the development and expansion of alternative structures, with less focus on adequate, specific strategies for implementation and overcoming resistance. If, to begin with, it were possible to find crossovers in current demands, successive comprehensive strategies for the specific implementation of socio-ecological transformation could be developed on this basis.

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

Joint perspective from unions and social movements – overcoming social imbalances and establishing socio-ecological production and a socio-ecological way of life

Without trade unions as a socio-political player, socio-ecological transformation is not deliverable. Equally, how this ecological transformation should occur in concrete terms remains a subject of debate. Trade unions are thus frequently confronted with the dilemma that ecological transformation risks occurring at the expense of workers. Reducing this tension and involving workers in the socio-ecological transformation will be a core challenge. An economy that holds on to capitalist driven growth will not only continue to damage the environment but also lead to heightened social inequality.

People are increasingly aware of the global and socio-ecological upheavals caused by the growth paradigm. However, the strategies engendered by this awareness are eclectic and contradictory in daily actions, especially when they have been developed on an individual basis. The expression „way of life“ opens up prospects for collective and democratic action as part of a socio-ecological transformation. Exactly what an appropriate life should look like remains a subject of collective debate. These debates and, above all, the issue of how trade unions and the workers represented by them try to overcome the inequalities associated with the current capitalist way of life, can be a decisive key to developing interfaces and joint actions with the de- and

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post-growth movement. For trade unions, cooperation with civil society actors is called for (see Lemb 2015, 18), however: „Occasionally [...] an input from outside is required in order for social change to become effective in unions as well; in other cases [...] union policy itself contributes to change in political relations“ (Wiesenthal 2014, 396 f.). Through productive collaboration between de- and post-growth perspectives on the one hand and union positions on the other, a broad alliance for socio-ecological transformation can develop. The question remains whether the necessary transformation will occur „by design or by disaster“ to use a prominent phrase from the de- and post-growth movement. Forging a societal alliance between unions and the de- and post-growth movement would be a welcome attempt to achieve the inevitable change „by design“.

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