Workers and Communities in Transition: Report of the Just Transition Listening Project

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

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The idea of “just transition” has recently become more mainstream in climate discourse. More environmental and climate justice advocates are recognizing the need to protect fossil-fuel workers and communities as we transition away from fossil-fuel use. Yet, as detailed in our report, transition is hardly new or limited to the energy industry. Throughout the decades, workers and communities have experienced near constant economic transitions as industries have risen and declined. And, more often than not, transition has meant loss of jobs, identities, and communities with little to no support.

While transition has been constant, the scale of the transition away from fossil fuels will be on a level not yet experienced. Fossil fuels are deeply embedded in our economy and society. Transition will not only affect the energy sector, but transportation (including passenger and freight), agriculture and others. Adding to the challenges of the energy transition, we are also transitioning to a post-COVID-19-pandemic world. As such, we cannot afford, economically or societally, to repeat the mistakes of the past that left so many workers and communities behind.

To better understand how transition impacts people, what lessons can be learned, and what practices and policies must be in place for a just transition, in the Spring of 2020 we launched the Just Transition Listening Project (JTLP). The JTLP has captured the voices of workers and community members who have experienced, are currently experiencing, or anticipate experiencing some form of economic transition.

Those who have suffered from transitions are rarely the ones whose voices are heard. Yet, no one is more able to fully understand what workers and communities need than those who have lived that experience. The JTLP is the first major effort to center these voices. In turn, the recommendations provided can make communities and workers whole. In many ways, these recommendations are common sense and fundamental to creating a just society, regardless of transition. Yet, the failure of elected officials to deliver just transition policies points to the need for wide scale movement building and organizing.

This report summarizes lessons learned and policy recommendations in three overall concepts for decision-makers: Go Big, Go Wide, and Go Far.

- The scope and scale of the transitions we will experience in the climate-safe economy will require us to be ambitious—Go Big. We will need a comprehensive approach that addresses the impacts on workers and communities across geographies, demographics and industries. The federal government will need to play a lead role. There are promising state and local just transition models, but none have access to the resources to fully fund their efforts. Strengthening the social safety net, workers’ rights, and labor standards will also be critical to supporting workers and communities equitably. Job creation will be central to assure successful transitions, and the federal government can and must invest heavily to support creation of good jobs in emerging clean industries in every region of the country.

- Just transitions must also be holistic—Go Wide. A common theme throughout the interviews we conducted as part of the JTLP was the trauma individuals and families experienced as their econ-
Omies were devastated. Several people referenced suicides, drug addiction, and depression among friends and co-workers who struggled with a loss of identity and relationships as factories that were central to their communities shut down. There are inspiring models of how unions and communities took matters into their own hands to provide mutual support and empower people in the midst of transitions. But much more can be done to build and strengthen this social infrastructure. Going wide also requires that unions and other workers’ organizations, frontline community organizations, and Indigenous nations are deeply engaged throughout the process of the transition.

Finally, just transitions must look into the future—Go Far. Workers who have established careers in an industry for many years complained of being offered training programs for jobs that did not exist in their region. The commitment to support these workers and their communities financially was often short-term with devastating consequences. Just transitions require a longer-term commitment of support and investment in workers and communities. Just transitions also require attention to generational differences: a younger, more diverse workforce has been growing into energy industries that will likely not offer long-term careers. It is essential to create good career alternatives for this generation.

The major findings of this report derive from more than 100 listening sessions, including qualitative interviews and focused discussion groups with workers and community members from across the United States conducted between May and October of 2020. Several themes emerged through these sessions, including a more complete picture of what transition entails, how coalitions come together, and what pathways to a just future exist. The main findings and some key recommendations for policymakers and movement organizations are provided as bullet points in this executive summary. The full report follows.

### a. Main Findings

- **Transitions are inevitable and constantly happening across the economy.** Past transitions, driven by market forces, corporate entities, and shortsighted public policies left workers and communities largely behind with little to no support.

- **The existing transitional policies are fragmented and inadequate,** leading to the destruction of human capital as well as deep resentment and opposition to social and environmental policies.

- **Workers and community members from all regions of the country are suffering from an historic decline and lack of access to opportunities.** Many also face the threat of losing opportunities in the near future. The COVID-19 pandemic and persistent structural racism and wealth inequality have exacerbated these realities. People affected by past unjust transitions are reacting harshly to climate action and policy, creating tensions between labor, community and environmental movements that often erupt into open conflicts.

- **Individual and collective understandings of transitions range widely according to type of work, class, gender, race, age, political ideology, previous experiences with environmentalists or the climate justice movement, and relationships with unions and the community.**

- **Just transitions in any sector require both targeted short-term and proactive long-term policies.**
In the inevitable energy transition some, but not all, fossil-fuel workers will be employed in the renewable energy sector.

Plans for supporting workers and communities in the transition away from fossil fuels must attend to local conditions and be rooted in the needs and aspirations of workers, unions, and disproportionately impacted communities.

**b. Recommendations**

Building on the themes of Go Big, Go Wide, and Go Far, we have drawn further recommendations from our interviews, and present them in three categories: recommendations for policymakers, recommendations for advocates, and recommendations for future research.

**i. Recommendations for Policymakers**

- Address immediate impacts of crises and transitions. This includes:
  - Immediately passing a robust relief plan of at least $1.9 trillion to support workers and communities suffering from the economic and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The relief should include recurring direct payments until the economy has recovered, and any investment should be in low-carbon sectors and not double down on the fossil fuel economy of the past.
  - Protecting displaced workers through a comprehensive set of policies appropriate for their circumstances, including wage replacement, alternative and comparable employment, health insurance coverage, relocation support, childcare, and pension and retirement contributions. Policies should also cover clerical, seasonal, and part-time workers impacted by the transition.
  - Creating and expanding government rapid response teams in every state to address job displacement and mass layoff situations, such as the Rapid Response Team in Massachusetts or the Transition Center in the Lordstown auto plant shutdown. Transitional services should extend to spouses and include mental health support, retraining opportunities, relocation, childcare services, and assistance from caseworkers who can help people consider career pathways, available resources, and how to access them.
  - Provide bridge funding for localities where the public sector is affected by the withdrawal of fossil-fuel tax revenues.

- Invest in long-term equitable economic transformation. This includes:
  - Any decision-making bodies should include all affected parties including workers, Tribal, environmental justice, communities.
  - Creating dedicated and robust funding to support transition efforts, including a Just Transition Fund.
  - Expanding the Trade Adjustment Assistance program (TAA) to include climate and other dislocations. Increase program funding and benefits, and open eligibility as widely as possible.
Seeding new sustainable industry growth in historically underserved regions, in addition to traditional fossil-fuel regions. This could be accomplished through legislation in the vein of the Green New Deal to create substantial numbers of new, high-quality low-carbon jobs and build significant low-carbon infrastructure. Any program must ensure Indigenous, marginalized, and disproportionately impacted communities have access to all economic opportunities and are protected from projects that degrade their living conditions.

Targeting Investment and procurement to under-resourced regions and urban areas to prepare them for the economy of the future, including broadband access expansion, public transit build-out, and repairing essential infrastructure such as drinking water systems.

Ensuring that any federally funded projects advance equity by prioritizing the creation of quality domestic jobs which include targeted hiring of workers from historically marginalized communities and those displaced from the fossil-fuel industry. Such projects should ensure prevailing wages and Project Labor Agreements, training and advancement opportunities, labor neutrality agreements, and promote and monitor affirmative action goals.

Supporting community-based efforts to bring diverse interests together to reimagine transitioning regions. Include labor, environmental justice, Tribal and community groups in decision making and oversight processes, such as the process that led to Colorado's Office of Just Transition, as well as in the implementation of transition plans envisioned by Washington State's Initiative 1631.

Strengthening and expanding social protections, including universal access to health insurance and decoupling from employer-based health coverage, childcare, and provide a living wage. Further, the government should serve as employer of last resort, ensuring a decent job for any person who seeks gainful employment. A new job in the waiting is typically the best transition plan.

- Protect the right to organize. Pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act so workers in all industries can have a voice on the job and bargain collectively with their employers.
- Subject all energy and infrastructure projects to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent when they involve Indigenous lands.
- Incorporate sustainability in every step of the transition process, from protection of pristine space to resource extraction through to waste management, including recycling.

ii. Recommendations for Labor and Movement Organizations

- Labor unions, workers’ rights organizations, and advocacy organizations should build cross-movement relationships by forming labor-climate-community roundtables, networks and/or committees at the state and/or local levels to build and sustain genuine personal and political relationships over time.
Labor unions should establish or expand any pre-existing environmental and climate committees, task forces, or other entities that can develop and deploy educational programs for members on issues of climate change; social, economic, and environmental justice; and just transition.

Environmental and other advocacy organizations should create labor committees to develop and deploy educational programs on issues of labor, job quality standards, and just transition.

Labor unions should adopt environmental and climate policy concerns as part of their advocacy agendas, and community organizations should adopt the right to organize and the promotion of strong labor standards as part of their advocacy agendas.

All organizations should create more mentorship and leadership development opportunities, especially for women, people of color, Indigenous people, and immigrants.

iii. Recommendations for Future Research

Identify where fossil-fuel activity is occurring, such as fossil-fuel power plants and extraction sites, the timeline for drawing down these activities, and the workforce and economic impact of this drawdown. This data can help workers and communities plan proactively for transition ahead of closure, rather than dealing with the situation reactively once a closure has been announced.

Analyze the environmental, social and labor practices of the emerging clean energy sector. A just green transition requires a clean energy sector with high standards and long-term provisions to prevent future unjust transitions.

Review past and ongoing transitions in order to identify promising policies/practices, with particular attention to those treating workers and communities as a whole (and not only as economic entities) while erasing any patterns of marginalization.

As noted, the energy transition is only one transition. Additional research is needed on ongoing sectoral transitions that will require just transitions, such as automation, digitalization, hybrid working, and health care.
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