



Conference Ambassador Report by Inés Tijera on:

Dialogue Session 410: “Just Transition – Fairness in Climate Protection. A Union Perspective.” (20th of August 2020, 17.30-19.00)

Discussants: Melanie Pichler, Anna Daimler, Julia Stroj, Dimitris Stevis, Bert de Wel

When talking about sustainability transitions, the dilemma of jobs versus environment will unavoidably be brought up. One of people’s major concerns continues to be that due to a decline of high-emission industries, unemployment might rise. For example, the automobile industry will be strongly affected, if societies attempt to reach the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. In order to achieve this objective, researchers have suggested three target points to radically reduce emissions caused by automotive vehicles: First, reduction of road transport, second, replacing of road transport, and third improvement of road transport. Within the automobile industry, most focus is placed on the last point, by example of the promotion of electric cars. However, this can be argued to inhibit the necessary reduction of individual road transport – the first of the three target points. This has also been observed by Melanie Pichler and her research team who conducted interviews with the workers of the Austrian automotive industry. Findings indicate a high trust in the improvement of the combustion engine. Rarely, any awareness of the necessity for a transformation of the mobility system is expressed by interviewees. Further, these workers do not see themselves in a position of producers but of consumers. This means that they perceive their role in the environmental crises as humans through their private lives, rather than their work. This aspect is particularly crucial when talking about just transitions. The workers of these industries are at high risk of being those “left behind” in transitions within the current system under the neo-liberal paradigm. To create just transitions means fostering transitions that are environmentally and socially sound. For such a just transition, workers need to be involved. However, currently workers are being used to prevent actual change in the system. The discourse is often diffused, and requests employees to be protective of their industry and of their companies in order for them to not get laid-off. This opinion-making on company level requires a loyalty in the sense of “do not bite the hand that feeds you”. Under the constant threat of losing their employment workers will be more than reluctant to accept or even vote for politicians who are pushing for environmental policies. This threat has become more real through the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the absence of a system that ensures the well-being of workers who lose their jobs, the massive decline in the transportation sector is conveying only one emotion: fear. In this context, it has been argued that the unionization of workers might be one way to making just sustainability transitions happen. Yet, many well-organized unions are critical of the implications sustainability

transitions might have on their sectors and do not necessarily support such ideas. Either way, there is a need for a climate and worker proof campaign in order to reach a new social contract, which distributes the costs of the transitions fairly. In most countries, labor laws need to be reformed so that workers can unite and make demands that protect themselves from bearing the costs of coming transitions. Further, the urgency rests with making people understand that simple technology fixes are not going to solve the multiple environmental crises that we are facing today. A profound transformation of the system is necessary in order to reach ambitious climate goals. It can be argued that in the EU there is a sense of the importance of the social dimension for the transition plans. A positive example comes from Spain where Teresa Ribera, a senior government member, is committed to talking to the unions to develop sectoral plans for their sustainability transitions.

However, one of the biggest challenges remains undiscussed in this dialogue session: How can workers outside of the EU or other privileged countries of the world be approached? After all, their existence is currently linked to the global production chains. What level of governance should be responsible for such a global just transition? Who can make international corporations accountable for these workers' well-being? When talking about just transitions, it is not sufficient for each national government to look out for its own. As some countries have been reaping the benefits of the exploitation of others, the question of redistribution and carrying of costs of transitions needs to be asked on a global scale. Yet as we know, global cooperation can be a highly difficult thing to achieve, especially when those who are the most powerful will profit the least.