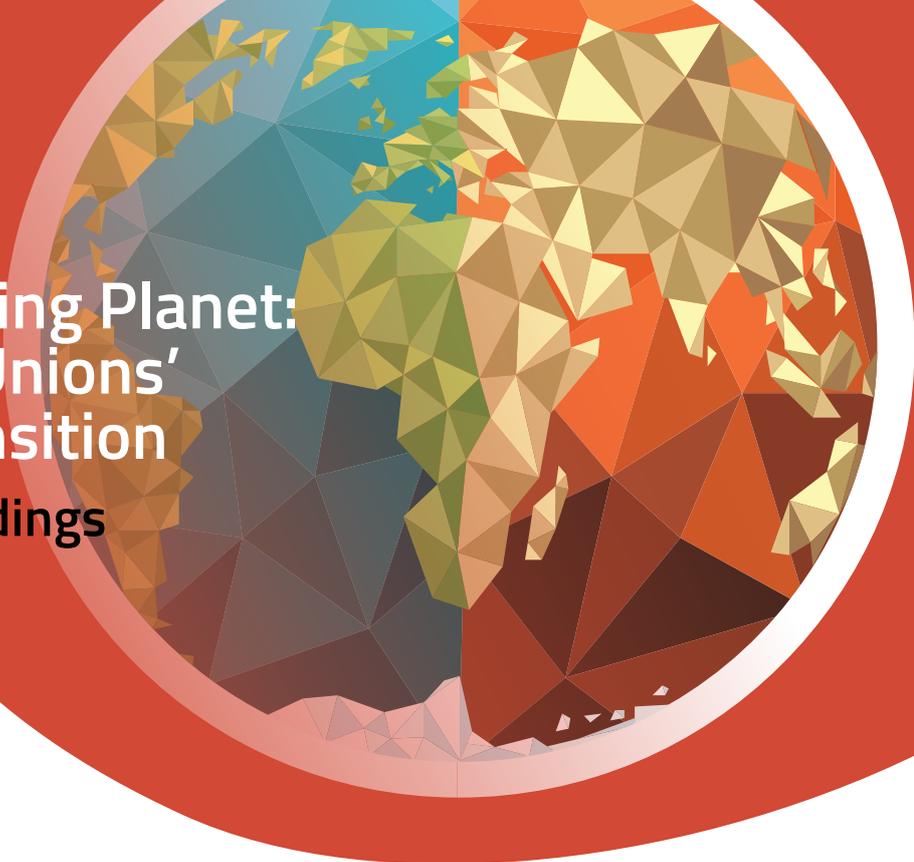


Educators on a Heating Planet: Shaping Education Unions' Vision for a Just Transition

Summary of research findings

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October 2022



Amidst an aggressively heating world, a just transition for educators has become a matter of urgency. Educators are already on the frontlines of climate change: every day, they are contending with the worst consequences of changes to the world's climate. From extreme hurricanes and storms to massive flooding, prolonged droughts, severe heatwaves, and sinking islands, climate change is already altering the education sector in indirect yet profound ways. Thus, educators are stakeholders in the discussions surrounding climate action and the crucial project of shifting to a low-carbon world.

The goal of averting irreversible climate change can only be achieved through a fundamental reorganisation of society. Decarbonising the global economy is imperative to this end, which means phasing out fossil fuel dependence and reconfiguring societal development to adhere to planetary boundaries¹. However, the necessary task of decarbonisation has also stoked fears across the globe of potential economic collapse.

In particular, the 'jobs vs nature' binary insists that any initiative to move to a low-carbon economy will come at the expense of economic growth and, by extension, workers'

rights. In response, the trade union and climate justice movements have forged the concept of a 'just transition' to address the political anxieties being provoked by climate change and the policies designed to tackle it. In a nutshell, a just transition seeks to promote social protection to cushion the effects of a low-carbon industrial transformation on vulnerable groups. Recently, it has evolved into a framework through which policies are envisaged to address the inequalities being exacerbated by climate change within countries. It is in this context that educators have approached the impacts of climate change on their sector and the just transition discourse.

Educators who participated in the study, "Educators on a Heating Planet: Shaping Education Unions' Vision for a Just Transition", are unanimous in pointing out the ill-preparedness of education infrastructure for the recent worldwide spate of severe heatwaves. Climate change has underscored the ongoing deterioration of many education systems with the increasing intensity,

¹ Steffen, W. et al. (2015) "Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet." *Science*, 347(6223). <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1259855>



frequency, and unreliability of storms, hurricanes, and typhoons causing damage to many poorly maintained education buildings. Decades of state neglect of social services mean that education systems are now unable to develop climate resilience. This has resulted in school calendar disruptions and diminished teaching capacity among educators. In some cases, climate impacts are compounding the workload of educators, especially in the aftermath of climate catastrophes. Moreover, the alarming rate with which sea levels are rising is also threatening the viability of island communities. The threat of sinking islands has massive consequences for the ongoing existence of local education systems.

A just transition for educators, therefore, is primarily concerned with addressing the adaptation needs of the sector and the communities that they serve. Educators see a substantial role for themselves in their communities; their concerns for environmental protection cannot be understood separately from this. Thus, while the job status of educators may not be directly imperiled by a shift to low-carbon industries, they are still affected by the ripple effects of job losses on their communities. Hence, many education unions feel strongly about building climate resilience in their schools and universities as well as their communities. They see this project as multi-pronged: the education sector must shift to renewable energy sources; education facilities should become resilience hubs in their communities; educational institutions should begin the process of disentangling their finances from fossil fuel companies; and, finally, governments must increase investment in public education as a climate-adaptation strategy.

On a broader scale, educators believe that the profession should be recognised as a 'low-carbon jobs sector' because they also have an integral role to play in the transformation of global economies and the workforce. Educators believe that the public education sector should lead the re-skilling and training of the workforce for low-carbon industries. The transition must, in no way, become another private enterprise venture that reproduces existing economic, racial, and gender inequalities by restricting access to the majority through exorbitant tuition and fees. Hence, educators' fight against privatisation must continue in the transition to a low-carbon world.

Finally, education unions see an opportunity in the just transition discourse to deepen their involvement on climate change and remain relevant to their members and communities. Aside from advocating for quality climate education for all, engaging with just transition is a way to spotlight the tangible impacts of climate change on the working conditions and future prospects of the education sector. Hopefully, this inspires education unions to recognise that the simultaneous crises surrounding education and climate change can only be confronted through collaboration, solidarity, and collective action.



The full research paper by Alanah Torralba can be found here:
<https://eiie.io/JustTransition>



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