

# The climate emergency is a core trade union issue: that's why it's time to 'Climate-Proof Our Work'

## Opinions



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Every season, the livelihoods of millions of families are being devastated by the climate emergency. Harvests are destroyed by drought, floods and wildfires. Houses and workplaces need to be rebuilt. An ever-increasing number of people are being displaced. Sadly, it is the poorest and most vulnerable people that are on the frontline of the most severe climate impacts. This year, for example, Mozambique was hit by not one but two deadly tropical storms. [Cyclone Idai](#), which also hit parts of Malawi and Zambia leaving over 1,000 people dead, is one of Africa's worst cyclones to date.

It is clear that all jobs are already, or will soon be, under threat from the climate crisis in one way or another. Workers have a right to know whether their livelihoods are guaranteed. That's why the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has reached out to all its affiliates with the campaign [Climate-Proof Our Work](#). On 26 June, workers will take part in a global day of action, where they will sign up to the movement and start a crucial conversation to find out what their workplace is doing to climate-proof people's jobs. We encourage every employee everywhere in the world to ask his or her boss questions like: "Is my organisation/company taking the ambitious climate measures that are urgent and necessary? Are we part of the energy transition to climate neutrality? Is my job climate proof?"

Workers around the world are growing anxious that policy makers are failing to respond with the required urgency to the climate crisis we are all facing. Nearly four years after the landmark Paris Agreement, [emissions are still going up instead of down](#). Renewable energy may be growing by double-digit figures in many parts of the world, but we still rely extensively on coal, petrol and gas for our energy – our addiction to fossil fuels continues unabated.

What will it take to bend the curve? For ambitious climate policies to be implemented one crucial element is missing: trust in a fair solution. Politicians need the support from their voters so that they can be re-elected. Many companies and businesses are contributing to climate solutions and expect to be supported in this by their governments. Workers and their families expect fair treatment by their governments and employers when ambitious climate policies are taken. But at the moment there are too many free riders (governments, companies and citizens) getting away with no climate action, or even blocking climate action. That's why workers have to speak up and organise. We have to make sure that our jobs, our businesses and our colleagues are ready for ambitious climate policies. This is a core union responsibility

and it starts on the work floor. A perfect example is the action taken by [Amazon employees](#), who called on its board members to do more to address the global climate emergency.

A recent report by the [Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures](#) indicated that more and more companies are reporting on their exposure to climate risks. Investors are demanding this information because they want to protect their money. But workers, who depend on this knowledge for their jobs, have even more of a right to know this.

## **A seat at the table for workers**

Our Climate-Proof Our Work campaign centres on the crucial instrument of social dialogue. Workers must have a seat at the table to discuss the policies and measures that affect their future. This is one of the [core labour standards](#), protected and promoted by International Labour Organization (ILO), and in too many places, these [core labour rights are being abused](#). So much so that labour leaders and environmental defenders are being killed while speaking up for their people. This is unacceptable.

Whether the discussions are on wages and labour conditions, or climate and environmental issues, workers don't want to be at the table for decorative purposes. We want to shape the future. That's why we have joined forces with civil society in many countries around the world to mobilise for climate action. Unions have marched with the school strikers around the world and we continue to collaborate with environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth to chart a clear path to a [just transition](#) where workers, communities and livelihoods are all protected in the shift from our current heavy reliance on coal to cleaner energy sources. Unions will also mobilise for a week of climate action in the run-up to the 2019 UN Climate Summit this September, where under the leadership of the governments of Spain and Peru, global leaders will be asked to make commitments to just transition policies.

We're happy that countries like Nigeria have signed the [Solidarity and Just Transition Declaration](#) that was presented during the [2018 climate conference in Katowice](#). The Nigerian government is actively collaborating with the Nigeria Labour Congress; this is the way forward we need. We are also seeing other unions in Africa, such as [COTU-K in Kenya](#), creating strong climate policy documents. All we need now is for more countries to follow suit.

A crucial concern in the transition to a climate-proof society is the issue of skills, which affects all workers in very different but direct ways. If someone works as a coal miner and their government is taking serious steps to phase-out coal, then their chances for a sustainable working future depend greatly on the kind of professional skills they have.

The ILO has done some valuable work in [mapping out the need for skills in the transition](#). Seven million workers risk losing their jobs in the ecological transition. Five million of these might have a chance to find a new job through relocation. However, two million will need to be reskilled in new occupations.

Labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport and machine operators are most vulnerable to losing their jobs without any possibility of relocation, making reskilling initiatives absolutely vital. A good example of an initiative which serves as a buffer for potential job losses as a consequence of transition is South Africa's [Training Layoff Scheme](#). This initiative provides an alternative to retrenchment through training and skills

development, providing a win for both employers and employees alike. Several other examples of how to mitigate climate impacts on workers exist across the world. The most effective solutions are those born in places with strong social dialogue mechanisms.

We hope that the Climate-Proof Our Work campaign will trigger important discussions from a national and sectorial level all the way to the enterprise and workplace level. Without a doubt, the need for a multi-layered approach to climate action is more important today than ever before. But so too is the need for these actions to be synchronised through widespread mobilisation.



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