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Anchoring a just transition: The ambivalent roles of Norwegian trade unions

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ABSTRACT

We examine how trade union actors at various scales of organisation and influence have engaged in the just transition agenda in Norway. The Norwegian model of industrial relations represents a democratic and highly institutionalised system of social dialogue, and allows us to assess the extent to which a just transition agenda is anchored at different levels, from tripartite decision-making to representation in the workplace. By introducing two analytical devices, anchorage and climate target compliance, we encourage just transition scholars to critically examine how trade union strategies, institutional contexts and normative outcomes are related in complex and non-linear ways. As a petroleum-dependent economy with ambitious political targets to reduce greenhouse gas emission, the Norwegian case is illustrative of the potential for trade union actors to proactively engage in climate target compliance through its role in just transition initiatives. Based on qualitative data from complementary research projects, our analysis suggests that the ambitions of key actors remain disconnected from the experienced reality of those who represent unions in bargaining or at a local level. The concept of a just transition still lacks internal anchorage between and across levels and segments of these organisations, as members and their elected representatives generally struggle to detect a clear mandate related to environmental concerns or emission reductions. Despite promising reformulations of policies and agreements at a central level, there is still little indication that Norwegian trade unions play a decisive role in making Norway meet their climate targets.

1. Introduction

Can the labour movement play a proactive role in helping the signatory countries to the Paris Agreement comply with their own nationally determined contributions? This question has been asked ever since the international union movement celebrated the inclusion of “the imperatives of a just transition” in the preamble of the Paris Agreement in 2015. And how do different levels of this multi-scalar social movement need to interact to play such a role? Just transition as a notion and a concept is not only gaining ground in policy processes across the world, but is becoming akin to a research field and an academic literature on its own terms (e.g. [1,2]). This article attempts to inform this literature, but from a novel and different perspective. Rather than exploring different interpretations of a just transition, we want to discuss just transition an actually existing (or emerging) process is being

anchored throughout the trade union hierarchy. By doing this, we take the union movement’s own rhetoric seriously: that the need for workers’ participation is crucial to legitimise climate politics among workers, *and* to move a just transition forward.

Not unlike the scholarly treatment of adjacent concepts such as climate justice [3] and energy democracy [4,5], the just transition literature overall has paid attention to the genealogy of the term and to the mutation of interpretations that has followed its spread across borders and political communities [6,7]. An impression one is left with after reading much of this work, is that trade unions are treated as more or less coherent actors choosing between more or less clearly demarcated just transition agendas (e.g. [8–10]). While not disputing the value of such typologies – we will in fact draw on some of them in our subsequent analysis – our focus is not on describing the diversity of possible iterations of the just transition agenda, but rather to explore its application in

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the ground.

Given its breadth of applications, from local union demands to multilateral rhetoric, involving non-union actors like employers [11] and politicians [12] in addition to unions, no attempt to investigate the practical-political applications of the just transition concept can expect the subject matter to be uncontested. Still, the mere fact that the agenda is becoming part-and-parcel of domestic climate policymaking would suggest the need for a critical examination of how just transition principles are being negotiated between different actors, different levels of decision-making and different political communities. Two empirical research questions have guided our own efforts to do so in the case of Norway: To what extent is the just transition agenda being established across scales, from the workplace or the trade union membership level to the country's efforts to meet its Paris commitments? And to what extent are these efforts directed towards keeping Norway's climate ambitions on track? We refer to the first process as the *anchorage* of a just transition agenda, and to the second as *climate target compliance*. We believe anchorage is crucial for the concept of just transition to move from an aspirational idea at a policy level to a transformative agenda in workplaces and communities locally. Likewise, we believe that without a demonstrable effect on climate target compliance, the just transition agenda risks being marginalised in climate policy processes. Put differently, what is at stake is both the popular legitimacy of the climate mitigation agenda among working people as such, and the legitimacy of trade union involvement in this agenda.

The article is structured as follows. We start by offering a theoretical framework that links trade union strategies to different institutional contexts and normative outcomes, with a particular focus on environmental justice and popular legitimacy. In the following sections we operationalise our investigation by surveying relevant research on just transitions; not to produce yet new typologies, but to assess what these texts can tell us about the processes of anchorage and climate target compliance based on extant research. We then go on to justify the case of Norway as relevant and interesting for critically exploring these processes, highlighting how oil and gas transitions might differ from previous coal transitions. In latter half of the article, we discuss concrete efforts to anchor just transitions in practice at various scales of political influence, decision-making and implementation in Norway over the last few years. Finally, we conclude by summarising our overall findings, and suggesting how they could inform future research on the anchoring of just transitions during a climate crisis.

2. Just transition: strategies, institutional contexts and outcomes

Our choice of analytical concepts should be seen against the theorisation of the concept of just transition in environmental labour studies and cognate disciplines. This literature is characterised by a basic assumption that the way societies' respond to the climate crisis is as much a question of how social actors mobilise and contest each other as it is about policy design (e.g. [38,39]). Various efforts have been made to explain the relation between i) trade union strategies, ii) institutionalised interpretations of environmental justice and iii) normative social outcomes. While this body of work arguably falls somewhat short of being a fully developed theory, several contributions offer important building blocks which thus far lacks proper integration. To do so, pitfalls on both sides should be avoided: these three elements should neither be thought of as fragmented nor in a linear relationship.

2.1. Strategies

The importance of the strategic work of trade unions is highlighted by the social movement tradition within labour studies, where authors such as Hampton [38], Räthzel and Uzzell [39] and Stevis and Felli [40] have contrasted unions with transformative strategies to those backing incremental reforms. This work has led to several interesting typologies,

contrasting how trade union envision a just transition: narrow or broad [9], transformative or affirmative [10], *from within* or *away from* fossil fuels [13], *managing change* or *pushing for change* [8], to name a few. But as Kalt [14] have pointed out, such analyses lack precision if they fail to consider the institutional context in which they are conceived. For instance, he highlights how sectoral interests, institutional power and the governance system are formative for trade unions' strategic work. The multifarious climate policy strategies adopted by trade unions within national labour movements are both a result of, and a shaper of, their institutional context.

2.2. Institutional contexts

Another source of potential confusion lies on how justice is operationalised in institutional contexts. Stevis and Felli [40] and Newell and Mulvaney [41] both distinguish between *procedural* dimensions of justice, the legitimate inclusion of actors and interests in the process, and *distributional or substantive* justice outcomes. In a just transition context, the latter could potentially include a country's ability to meet their climate targets, the distributional effects of compensation policies, the legitimacy of a government's climate policies among trade union member and other desired outcomes. As trade union agendas include myriad issues, ranging from workplace democracy to global emission targets, the relationship between procedural and substantive justice is complex. Few have attempted to explicitly acknowledge these dilemmas in the research literature. Arguably, there is even a tendency to conflate processual inclusion with assumed normative outcomes. The implicit assumption that just transition processes – done right – will have an equally beneficial impact on outcomes as different as climate target compliance and democratic legitimacy, should at the very least be backed by empirical evidence.

There are a number of different potential roles organised labour can play in climate policy. A recent intervention from political scientists describes labour as an 'emerging constituency' shaping domestic climate policies [15], distinguishing between its role as an *influencer* of public policy, a *decision-maker* in political and industrial relations systems, and as an *implementer* of climate policies in the labour process and in workplaces. The latter role in particular is described as embryonic, lacking few documented examples, and in the few places where it does occur, marred by lack of awareness and buy-in at a local level (see also [16]). All three roles are relevant to our analysis. Norwegian unions and their confederations have for long, through their institutional access to politics and strong organisational capacity, had the potential to affect how a just transition agenda is framed by policymakers. They can also influence decisions concerning emitting sectors. In short, they have a say over how both procedural and substantive justice is practiced. Through their organisational hierarchy, they can also ensure that the objectives that emanate from this decision-making is being met, by mobilising their constituency in the policy implementation phase. In short, the implementer role is also a distinct possibility.

2.3. Normative outcomes

Possibility does not guarantee action, however. As we will demonstrate in this article, it is important to critically assess which justice dimensions and which normative outcomes trade unions prioritise when given a role in just transition processes. By way of summary, we suggest that researchers of just transition processes apply a flexible theoretical framework that helps researchers to avoid conflation between procedural inclusivity and assumed outcomes, while insisting on the importance of both. We also encourage research in this field to heed Kalt [14] advice to always view these processes in their relevant institutional, national and sectoral context. Before we turn our attention to the Norwegian case, we will elaborate on two insights from recent studies of just transition processes which will help justify why we have chosen to focus on cross-hierarchical legitimacy and climate target compliance as

normative outcomes in our own research.

3. The laboured implementation of just transitions across scales

A just transition, most observers would agree, requires actual decarbonisation process to have meaningful involvement by affected workers, communities and regions and lead to outcomes perceived as fair to these constituencies [6,17]. The mushrooming of articles discussing the concept of just transition in recent years testifies to its growing political appeal, but also to an emerging recognition among climate and sustainability researchers that the success of climate policies hinges on a popular legitimacy that can only be built with an acute awareness of the work-related impacts of mitigation. We will discuss two of the concerns raised in the academic literature on just transition with particular relevance for the analysis we are developing in this article: its multiscalar nature and perceived detachment from decarbonisation targets.

3.1. Bottom-up and top-down legitimacy

Firstly, scholars have documented the proliferation of just transition processes at various scales of organising, from global multilateral developments to local and regional initiatives. Observers suggest that the agenda itself seems to mutate across political scales, as different actors and levels of political power instrumentalise the concept to further their own goals. For instance, Morena et al. [6] have warned that the globalisation of the concept, driven by the mobilisation of national unions and culminating in its inclusion in the Paris Agreement, at times have led to a narrower sectoral scope and opened the possibilities for using just transition rhetoric in political and corporate greenwashing (a concern shared by [11] with reference to Australian just transition initiatives). At the other end, Lundström, Rätzl & Uzzell [18] distinguish between bottom-up and top-down environmental agendas within Swedish trade union hierarchies and argue that both can be hampered by “the lack of a structure organising regular communication between ‘above’ and ‘below’”.

Gärdebo [19] identifies a main tension in Sweden’s just transition agenda between the generalist perspectives of central level union officials, accommodating international and intergenerational notions of solidarity in their conceptualisation, and the ‘emplaced’ perspectives of local unionists, defending particular workplaces and communities. A recent survey of Norwegian employees indicates that relatively few workers feel affected by or included in climate mitigation and energy transition efforts [20]. These and related studies clearly tell us that we need to empirically investigate how just transition agendas traverse political scale and do so cognisant of the unequal power dimensions that undergird these processes. Put differently, if just transition initiatives developed either in multilateral international arenas, or locally in workplaces and communities, are to have transformative effects beyond their immediate context, they need to harness the multi-scalar structures of the labour movement. At the same time, it would be naive to believe that efforts of scaling up initiatives, or anchoring them locally, would not involve reinterpretation.

3.2. Derailing the decarbonisation agenda?

Secondly, some just transition scholars have started asking whether just transition initiatives have measurable positive effects on the climate targets of industries, countries and regions. The question is pertinent, given that the just transition concept is reactive in its origin. Given the concept’s historical basis in claims for compensation and facilitation in context of closing factories or phasing out industries (Hampton 2015), it is understandable that less focus has been directed at climate target compliance. The question is still worth asking, however, not least because some observers have made the argument that just transition frameworks in their current form threaten to “derail societies plans to

achieve a low-carbon policy” ([21]: 2). Jenkins et al. [42] warns that, despite the inclusion of the concept in the Paris Agreement, just transition policies and initiatives are currently detached from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). They describe the need to align and operationalise emerging just transition initiatives with their countries’ respective Nationally Determined Contributions as “the most challenging and imperative step” for just transitions to materialise (Jenkins et al. 2020: 139). For trade unions across the world, these observations should be a cause for concern. If the entire concept of a just transition is seen as counterproductive to national and multilateral decarbonisation efforts, they might risk securing control over an agenda that is gradually being marginalised.

We do not suggest that researchers can determine the effects of particular just transition initiatives on climate target compliance in any quantifiable or precise manner. Still, we should not be blind to this relationship. After all, “actively encouraging decarbonization” constitutes the first of seven just transition principles in the guiding framework developed by researchers at the Stockholm Environment Institute ([22]: 4). If actors involved in just transition initiatives become indifferent to climate targets, or experience a lack of influence over their operationalisation, these processes risk becoming derailments – like Heffron and McCauley warned us – rather than bridges to sustainable futures. With these two points in mind, we will now operationalise two heuristic devices for assessing how strategies relate to normative outcomes in our own stock-taking of the Norwegian actors.

4. An analytical framework

4.1. Anchorage

We use the concept of *anchorage* to refer to a coordination process between and across scales of influence and organisation. Specifically in our case, this applies to the inclusion of new issues and mandates in existing institutional set-ups. This form of anchoring, we believe, resonates with what other scholars of a just transition have variously characterised as “social buy-in” ([23]: np), the diffusion of environmental priorities throughout the union ([24], p. 446), the articulation between different levels of social dialogue ([25]: 27), rooting the just transition concept in frontline communities and unions ([6]: np) or, to stress the possibility of anchoring from the bottom-up, as what Lundström et al. [18] refer to the regularisation of communication between the ‘above’ and the ‘below’.

Moreover, defining the internal anchoring of organisations as a coordination process includes relating the ‘being’ and the ‘doing’ of actors and structures. In an organisational change process, such as transforming environmental concerns and passed policies into action, anchorage represents a conceptual tool for exploring the (dis)connection between discursive change (the ‘being’) and material change (the ‘doing’). How organisations and institutions describe themselves in formal policies often differ from how they perform their mandates and functions in practice, not least when said policies are new. Studying the issue of environmental sustainability, as it goes from articulated policy to performed practice in the Norwegian labour movement, requires us to pay attention to discursive and material aspects simultaneously. While our analysis builds on several free-standing research projects, in all of these we have been interested in examining whether formal anchoring – i.e., through agenda-setting or in the passing of policies – have translated into practical anchoring through actions. To give an example of how this approach has affected our methodology, we have used quotes from official union policies or collective agreements as elicitation techniques in interviews and focus groups to assess whether local union representatives and members recognise formally stated policy ambitions in their daily work.

4.2. Climate target compliance

Furthermore, we use *climate target compliance* as an indicator of whether just transition are structured or practised in ways that proactively engages with the climate targets of workplaces, industries, regions or the country as a whole. We operationalise climate target compliance in this manner cognisant of how climate targets are not the only legitimate goals or outcomes of these initiatives. Abram et al. [23] makes an important point when stating that the notion of a just transition “should not be seen as an ‘add-on’ to climate policies but needs to be embedded as an operational priority to be implemented effectively in the signatory countries”. Social equity, economic sustainability and environmental concerns that are not directly climate-related are all examples of targets that just transition initiatives can help achieve. But just as social concerns should not be treated as an optional, so should not demonstrable and transformative climate change mitigation be treated as a secondary objective when social dialogue partners sit down to discuss a just transition.

In the remainder of this article, we ask whether anchorage and climate target compliance are outcomes that can be observed in the case of Norway. The empirical basis for this analysis comprises interview and focus group material from three graduate student projects, one doctoral project, and three different research projects undertaken in the period 2018–2023. Informants in the trade union movement have been key in all of these projects, ranging from union members and workplace representatives to elected representatives and appointed officials from union headquarters and union confederations. In total, we have interviewed more than 50 interviewees and facilitated focus group conversations with around 60 participants. The unions included in this study are mainly from the petroleum industry and the municipal sector, in addition to some interviews with other unions, business associations, government officials and other experts. Our reading of interview and focus group material has been supplemented with document analysis, mainly of policy documents from the government and national trade unions.

While the research questions undergirding each of these projects vary, we have used a collaborative workshop and writing process to juxtapose material from all of these projects. The first step in our analysis was an open discussion about what our findings, focusing on different scales of engagement, had in common. Next, the lead author introduced the two concepts of anchorage and climate target compliance to further develop a narrative that binds together high-level policy meetings with the experience of shopfloor representatives. Drafts of the argument have thereafter been circulated among the author collective. While examining anchorage was explicitly included in the research design of all our projects, climate target compliance was often treated implicitly. We have therefore reassessed our own material, specifically asking whether the institutional arrangements we have studied openly and explicitly deal with climate targets in writing or in conversational transcripts. Often, we have been as interested in what *has not* been said, or *who was not* represented, as in documenting our cases on their own terms. We will return to this conundrum in our conclusion.

5. Just transition in Norway

A critical evaluation of the status of the just transition agenda in Norway begs the question of what the Norwegian case has in common with just transition initiatives elsewhere - and where it differs? Two contextual characteristics in particular need unpacking. First, the fact that Norway is an oil and gas producer without a significant coal industry, and with an electricity grid based on hydropower. Second, the Norwegian labour market is built on tripartite cooperation, centralised bargaining, high union density (also in the industrial sector) and cooperative traditions at the workplace scale. The notion of a just transition in Norway will therefore have to take the country’s petroleum dependence and its highly institutionalised labour market into account in

order to be politically effective. By way of illustration, the biggest corporate actor on the Norwegian Continental Shelf, Equinor, still has the state as its majority owner and three union representatives on its board of directors. Taxes and revenues from oil and gas help finance the country’s welfare state.

A quarter of the domestic emissions of greenhouse gases in Norway stems from petroleum extraction, and most of these are from gas turbines on offshore installations. In addition, and more importantly in a global perspective, the end use of Norwegian petroleum across the globe leads to emissions many times greater than those from offshore and onshore production facilities. The Norwegian predicament differs from the cases hitherto described in the just transition literature in the sense that petroleum extraction on the Norwegian continental shelf still experiences high profitability, few signs of reduced extraction levels in the medium term and maintains high activity levels in the supply industry along the coast [43]. The industry also has broad political backing from both sides of the political aisle. It thus contrasts with just transition experiences in the coal regions of Germany [12], the US Appalachians [26], Alberta [27] or South-East Australia [28] where the coal industry either faces a political commitment to phasing out or unfavourable prospects in the energy market.

5.1. Social dialogue around the future of oil and gas?

For this reason, any attempt to carve out a just transition agenda in Norway needs to take a stance on the future of the petroleum industry. The political slogan “develop, not decommission” holds strong appeal among voters and workers close to the industry, and signals a political intent to build an energy transition based on the skills and technologies of oil and gas. Oil companies and business associations have also launched their own transition plans, typically linked to the goal of reaching net zero in 2050, based on electrification from the land-based grid in the short-term, and the use of CCUS technologies and offshore wind production in the long-term [43]. Trade unions in the extractive and process industries and the largest trade union confederation have actively backed this trajectory, while unions organising in retail, renewable energy production and in the public sector have proposed measures to phase out petroleum extraction and protect vulnerable maritime areas from exploration. Hence, just transition advocates in Norway are not primarily tasked with getting the unions on board a new political consensus, but rather to negotiate an internally contested consensus in the trade union movement. Together with the continued support of the dominant business associations, a compromise position championed by the main trade union confederation has served as a bulwark for mainstream politicians who thus far has chosen to back plans to decarbonise petroleum production while continuing long-term investment in the petroleum industry instead of devising a rapid phase-out plan [13,29,30].

In the last few years, however, high electricity prices have soured public opinion on the plans to electrify offshore installations with electricity from land, putting in jeopardy the industry’s emission reduction targets for 2030 and 2050. Tightening household energy budgets, resistance to onshore wind power and the electricity needs of emerging green industries all threaten plans for electrification in the petroleum sector. These trends have thus altered the prospects for a just transition in Norway. This situation puts pressure on relations between petroleum-related unions and the rest of the labour movement, and on relations between unions and other social actors, like business representatives and environmental organisations in civil society. It also, and this we shall return to later, creates friction between centralised actors in all of these organisations who are focused on national development and emissions targets, and local representatives worried that their workplaces and communities might lose out in the struggle over workplaces, investments and affordable electricity (cf. [19]).

Still, three quarters of domestic emissions are not related to the extraction and processing of fossil fuels. That is why a just transition

agenda in Norway must appeal to workplaces and sectors across the entire economy. The potential to reduce emissions in the transport sector, or to establish sustainable, circular practices in retail, are huge [31]. The public sector can exert significant leverage over societal mobility and consumption through their role in public procurement, planning and regulation, in addition to being sizable organisations in their own right. The opportunity and responsibility for realising a just transition of the economy as a whole is not lost on the main trade union and business associations, who often flag this potential in their own rhetoric - and in high-profile events like the annual Working Life Climate Week (Norwegian: *Arbeidslivets klimauke*). Still, while this general notion has support from organised labour and organised capital alike, major questions remain unanswered regarding how a just transition is to be implemented in practice, and what mandate representatives of workers have in the workplace, in local government, across value chains and in sectors of the economy.

5.2. Social dialogue as an advantage or a challenge?

Social dialogue as an institutionalised feature of the Norwegian system of labour relations from the local to the central level, makes the case of Norway interesting in a just transitions perspective. Many just transition advocates in other countries have emphasised the importance of a democratically based framework of social dialogue as a prerequisite for a meaningful just transition [8,26]. In other words, establishing social dialogue has been proposed as a step towards a just transition, in considering workers in industries that is to phase out (e.g. [25]). But what if there is not decision to phase out, and the model of social dialogue is well established? In this article, we will explore to what extent the model of social dialogue mechanisms in Norway has been activated or harnessed to anchor a just transition agenda, and proactively align this agenda with the country's ambitious climate targets. By doing so, we connect with several interventions that have problematised the relationship between social dialogue and the just transition agenda. Related studies of the Swedish case, for example, have provocatively suggested that the social dialogue model itself might act as a barrier. Lundström et al. [18], for instance, argue that “the conditions for integrating environmental issues [in the trade union] are weakened by the hierarchical culture of the organisation and by high levels of institutionalisation”. Similarly, Molina [25] identifies both the limited inclusion of environmental issues in existing social dialogue frameworks and the “weak articulation between different levels of social dialogue” as reasons why social dialogue frameworks often fail to generate meaningful just transition processes.

By way of summary, we argue that the Norwegian case is interesting for two different reasons. First, because building a national just transition pathway requires the social partners to agree on the future of a petroleum industry that still delivers huge financial benefits to society and enjoys broad political support (see also [13]). Second, because a just transition in Norway must harness a highly institutionalised social dialogue mode which already is in place, from local workplaces to centralised tripartite arenas [32]. Our investigation is *multi-scalar* in the sense that it explores anchoring processes from the national level to that of shopstewards and ordinary union members, and *cross-sectoral* as it does not limit the notion of just transition in Norway to a narrow question of the future of oil and gas – whilst being cognisant of the relevance of domestic extraction to the legitimacy of a national just transition strategy.

6. Across sector and scale

6.1. Tripartite arenas

Starting at a national level, there are several arenas where representatives of trade union confederations or large national trade unions collaborate formally or informally with employers and state officials

(and to some extent experts and civil society groups outside the traditional tripartite system) in influencing policies that impact on Norway's ability to reduce emissions, produce renewable energy or establish green industrial pathways. Some recent examples of formal processes include the 2022–2023 Energy Commission, and the 2023 Power Initiative (Nor. *Kraftløftet*), as well as the sectoral Climate partnership agreements that the Minister of Trade and Industry announced in the same year (delivering on a promise in the government platform of 2021). While the latter of these are particularly promising, given that it explicitly includes national climate targets and just transition as objectives, most of these tripartite institutions are much more explicit on what the Norwegian economy needs *more* of (energy, industry, employment) than what it needs *less* of (emissions and extracted fossil fuels). This bias is epitomized in the title of the Energy Commission's report: “More of everything – faster”.

Here, however, we have chosen to focus on another initiative, namely the Council for a Just Transition of Working Life. The council was borne out of a promise in the then newly elected centre-left government's platform in 2021, in part as a response to union dissatisfaction with The Climate Change Committee 2050, appointed by the previous centre-right government without union representation. A Council for a Just Transition of Working Life could thus offer popular legitimacy to a just transition agenda. Given that the Council's main mandate was to anchor climate policies in the membership ranks of organised labour and organised capital [44], it is worth noting that neither the recommendations of the Climate Change Committee nor any potential recommendations by the Council for a Just Transition will be embraced by politicians – or even the social partners. Rather, they function in an advisory role to policymakers.

The Council met for the first time in September 2022. Along with the Minister, high-ranking representatives of the major employers' associations and trade union confederations were represented. The Council agreed to meet twice a year to discuss the challenges and possibilities that decarbonizing the Norwegian economy presented to working life and the labour market, with the Norwegian climate targets set for 2030 and 2050 laying the foundation for the Council's work. The Council for a Just Transition of Working Life therefore offer us a window through which to study how the Norwegian tripartite social dialogue translates the concept of just transition into practice. Or does it not? By speaking to centrally located actors in the Council, and analysing available documents and minutes emanating from the Council's meetings, one of the co-authors have tried to answer these questions in a systematic fashion.

More than a year after the Council first met, and more than halfway into the current government's period, concrete outcomes seem to be rather limited. After having provoked controversy during its early phase, mainly because environmental organisation took offense to them not being invited and largely dismissed as unsuitable dialogue partners by the leader of LO-Norway, the Council has since then kept a low public profile. While being touted as a significant victory by the trade union representatives, the Council has not been given a mandate to produce concrete policy outcomes. To better understand the discrepancy between the Council symbolic importance and its limited impact on policy-making, we have to look closer at how the partners interpret their mandate.

The first thing to note is that the Council is founded on a very process-focused understanding of just transition. Staff representatives of union confederation explained that an important tenet of the just transition concept is who gets to define the process.

By being included in the Council, and by not including organisations outside the tripartite system, the establishment of the Council clearly signals that the trade unions have this definitional power. Another union confederation's representative even argued that “the concept of just transition is really just a clarification of the Norwegian model in this policy area”. The policy area referred to here is the transition of working life and the labour market, as the Council has clearly specified that it is not concerned with all aspects of climate mitigation. As the Council's

members see the process as a goal in itself, it should perhaps come as no surprise that the Council has yet to engage meaningfully in an operationalizing of national climate targets.

Another representative of a main union confederation acknowledged this in the following interview passage:

“Just transition is to a large extent a process. But it is also [...] defining the conflicts of interest. In that sense it is an ok concept. But it is not a driver of change.”

(author’s translation)

This last quote points to a second conundrum in how the Council operates. Like other social dialogue forums, its institutional design clearly states that the capital-labour relation represents the fundamental conflict of interest. But given the ecological, intergenerational and global concerns at stake in the ongoing climate crisis, the concerns of environmental organisations that there are important interests not being represented in this Council, can be perceived as legitimate. On many issues related to the regulation of emissions and stimulating industrial growth, the interests of capital and labour, particular within the same sector, might be closely aligned, while the de facto opposition is to be found in organisations mobilising against unsustainable emissions and biodiversity loss.

This might help explain why these social dialogue mechanisms seem to be better at producing consensus around what the economy needs more of, than what it needs to reduce. Our assessment of the tripartite system resonates closely with how Normann and Tellmann [13] concluded their assessment of Norwegian trade union policy:

“Trade unions are one type of actor that in most circumstances have had a preference for creation policies whilst resisting decline policies. If trade unions are to become a force for change, they also need to support deliberate decline policies.”

The critical assessment presented above notwithstanding, we should neither overstate the importance of the Council for a Just Transition of Working Life, nor equate the impact of the Council with the impact of the Norwegian model of social dialogue in general. In its mandate, the Council specifies that it is to operate in a complementary fashion to other social dialogue arenas where Norway’s climate targets are being discussed. Still, as we shall see, the shortcomings of this particular arrangement can be seen as emblematic of a more general challenge.

6.2. Greening the Basic Agreements

We will now move from the tripartite relations representing the pinnacle of social dialogue in Norway, to the bilateral forms of cooperation and conflict that more directly affect workers in their everyday working lives. For workers and their representatives to exert influence over how transition efforts play out in the workplace in a highly institutionalised system like the Norwegian one, formal arrangements are crucial. The Basic Agreements, in particular, represent foundational documents in a sophisticated hierarchy of agreements between employers’ associations and trade unions. Here, the parties state who will have a say over which issues. While mentions of environmental sustainability had already found its way into the language of some Basic Agreements in the early 2010s, a renewed interest in the role of organised labour in transition processes at the end of the decade did in the municipal sector culminate in the 2020 Basic Agreement between the main municipal employers’ association and the biggest trade unions. Here, the preamble clearly states.

“...that climate and environmental measures furthering the Sustainable Development Goals are part of the workplace relations stipulated by the Basic Agreement.”

How exactly this was to be done, however, was not specified. In 2022, new sentences emerged in a revised iteration of the agreement stating that the local partners are to be consulted regarding the climate

and environmental measures of each municipality or organisation.

The Basic Agreements function as the first chapter of a hierarchy of agreements in Norwegian working life which include central collective bargaining agreements as well as local and workplace-specific agreements. Tariff agreements are borne out of institutionalised conflict where the partners can legally threaten with strikes and lock-outs to achieve their objectives. The Basic Agreements also lays down principles for how employers and employees are to cooperate locally. Such local workplace relations are based on a more pragmatic and collaborative understanding of working life, and is often referred to as “the Norwegian micro model” ([33]: 22). In this way, the Basic Agreements become important tools for anchoring processes of just transition at sectoral and local scales of negotiation and collaboration. At the time the 2020 Basic Agreement was revised, just before the global outbreak of the covid pandemic, several trade unions in Norway signalled intent to include environmental demands in the tariff negotiations. Some unions had done preparatory work (e.g. [32]) giving them belief that a range of issues – from commuting arrangements, via collective pension and insurance deals, to workplace emission budgets – could be subject to negotiation between the employer and employee representatives.

Three years down the line, it seems clear that using the Basic Agreements as a vehicle to bring climate and environmental demands to the negotiation table had failed to deliver on its promise, even in municipal and retail bargaining areas where trade unions had been open to the idea. Many reasons can possibly help explain this outcome, most notably changing priorities within the organisations following pandemic restrictions and a return to bread-and-butter issues among its member base after the electricity price crisis that emerged when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2021. Speaking to centrally placed union officials and representatives of the municipal employers’ association, they also appeared to agree that the partners had not yet managed to concretise how climate and environmental issues were to be included in centralised bargaining [45]. To get to that stage of operationalisation, the organisations were eager to learn from local ‘best practice’ in municipalities. To encourage such ‘best practice’, some unions had developed practical guides to local union representatives on how to engage in their employers’ climate and environment-related processes. The process of anchorage had, in other words, reached a point where central actors did not feel they could get much further without a stronger bottom-up involvement. The baton had been passed on to local union representatives and employers. In our view, this is not a question of a power jostling between central and local levels of the union hierarchy, but rather indicates that union actors still lack the relevant knowledge and have yet to develop concretised priorities which would enable them to meaningfully engage in mitigation policies locally.

In the summer of 2023, we explored the status and potential of employer-employee cooperation related to climate and environmental measures in two selected municipalities in Eastern Norway. Cognizant of the desire to learn from local ‘best practice’, we asked the partners directly for advice in our case selection. While this article does not permit a lengthy exposition of our findings, it is not exaggeration to state that the extent to which bilateral relations had been involved, let alone mobilized, in these municipalities’ transition processes was very limited. From the employers’ perspective, involving the unions was seen as carrying the risk of potentially derailing or slowing down the municipalities’ ambitious efforts to become green and sustainable. Put differently, anchorage could come at the expense of target compliance. But resistance to a more active climate- and environment engagement in local workplace relations could also be found among local union representatives, as we will return to below.

6.3. Getting local union representatives on board

We have now come to a point in our exploration of the anchoring process where we are compelled to take seriously how the rank-and-file experiences Norwegian society’s decarbonization efforts. This has been

the focus of much of our research over the last few years, with a particular focus on the role of local union representatives. As shown above, local actors have been given much responsibility for taking the next step in the municipal sector. Norway's climate targets encompass the entire economy, however, and suggest we take a broader look across sectors. Many of the interviews and focus groups we have conducted have been with local union representatives in the petroleum sector and related supply industries. These people represent workplaces where employer-initiated transition processes are unfolding, but they are also immersed in an intense public debate over the future of their entire sector. Given this context, it is perhaps surprising that many local union representatives were not familiar just transition as a term at all during a focus group even in late 2021:

“This idea of just transition... it is not something I have given much thought until today. I have thought about transition, but not just transition”

(from focus group with union representatives in 2021)

Not actively engaging with the term is not the same as saying that local union representatives are not demanding fairness for their members in transition processes, however. Another participant observed that “we have a better chance at a just transition, even though we are lagging behind, because of our unions being strong spokespeople for us”. Several focus group participants pointed out that local union representatives had been instrumental in ensuring that the Norwegian Parliament passed a tax stimulus package for the petroleum sector during the covid pandemic in May 2020.

There hadn't been any ‘oil package’ last year [...] without involvement from local union reps. We drove it, worked continuously, day and night [...] to pressure union leadership to do the job for us. [In order to] save the oil industry as a foundation for renewable industries.

(from focus group with union representatives in 2021)

The ‘oil package’ was designed to secure jobs in the supply industry, and was thus framed in ways that reminisce of just transition processes elsewhere. But the relationship between this sector-specific tax stimulus and the development of renewable industries hinted at in the quote above has been much debated. Analysts have predicted that the tax incentives announced in May 2020 will entail that a significant share of capital and labour that potentially could fuel renewable and green industrial development in the crucial 2020–2030 decade will continue to be tied to oil and gas [34]. This observation finds support in projections by The Norwegian Petroleum Directorate [35], and led the prime minister at the time, Erna Solberg, two years later to concede that the ‘oil package’ had been “too generous”. This admission was done in hindsight, however. Since then, neither the political parties leading the ‘oil package’ through parliament nor the trade unions and business associations mobilising for it in the first place have made any efforts to dampen the effects of the tax stimulus to support a speedy energy transition.

While this particular process exemplifies how local union representatives have been involved in efforts that arguably slowed down a just transition of fossil fuel extraction in Norway, we have also spoken to local union representatives in the petroleum sector about their potential to facilitate climate and sustainability measures in the workplace. In the petroleum and supply industries, such measures can include a wide range of changes to industrial processes, related to circularity, waste, workplace consumption and energy use, as well as efforts to steer investment over to offshore wind, carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS), and hydrogen and ammonia production, to name a few. Our respondents in the oil industry were typically interested in these issues, and were knowledgeable about many of these technologies. When we first spoke to our respondents in 2018–2019, however, they agreed that such questions did not concern them in their role as local union

representatives [46].

I think it is very good if the organisations on a national level engage, but I feel that it is not my task as a representative of the members.

(from focus group with union representatives in 2019, authors' emphasis)

Two years later, in November 2021, we detected a slight shift in how these issues of responsibility were discussed. Firstly, many experienced a greater awareness about transition and climate issues during their respective union congresses and in the preparatory work for these. Secondly, several focus group participants expressed a desire to engage more directly with environmental activists around these contested issues. By way of illustration, the above-mentioned Council for a Just Transition of Working Life had been announced some months prior to this meeting, with the ensuing media debate around the role (or lack of it) of environmental organisations in this institution. While the leader of the main trade union confederation, Peggy Hessen Følsvik of LO-Norway, had been quick to exclude these organisations from what was essentially a tripartite arrangement, several union representatives in the oil and gas industry argued for a different approach. To them, allowing these organisations to have their voice heard made sense to counter the tendencies of political polarisation and conflict.

Turning our attention back to the municipal sector, where we interviewed local union representatives in the summer of 2023, we find the ‘not my task’ attitude to be well-established. Union representatives we spoke to in the main unions organising municipal employees, including education workers and technical staff, told us that even though they experienced certain expectations by their own unions to get involved in their employers' efforts to become more environmentally sustainable, they felt they lacked the time, resources and knowledge to do so in a meaningful way. They also felt that whatever mandate they had been given – through the Basic Agreement – was vaguely defined.

From one perspective, this finding is surprising. After all, trade unions in the municipal sector have been vocal on climate target compliance in general, and fossil fuel extraction in particular, in public debate and during the annual congresses of their confederations. One could therefore expect these organisations to achieve a different level of operationalisation in their own work. But as Bie-Drivdal [36] documented in her comparison of role perceptions in the ‘Norwegian micro-model’ of working life, this must be understood against a backdrop where union representatives in the public sector typically have interpreted their own leverage in a more constrained way than in the industrial sector, where union representatives have a long-standing tradition of getting involved in strategic decisions and workplace innovation. By way of summary, if local union representatives are to play a more active role in just transition processes, municipal employees might have to take some inspiration from their colleagues in the industrial sector on how to interpret their own leverage vis-a-vis their employers. In return, they might encourage their industrial counterparts to think of climate target compliance and workplace sustainability transitions as part of their agenda.

6.4. Anchoring a just transition in the member base

Not much is known about how Norwegian union members, more than two million ordinary people who give their trade unions and union confederations their power, think about the role organised labour should play in a just transition. In a yearly survey mapping employee perception on co-determination and workplace democracy, Dahl and Hagen [37] found that most unionised members did not regard climate mitigation as an issue to be prioritised by their local representatives. But the carbon footprint is a relatively new and untested issue in local workplace relations, and respondents had to weigh this against well-established issues like work-time arrangements and occupational health and safety.

In a qualitative study one of the co-authors have done with regular members of three trade unions in retail and the public sector, the impressions are more nuanced. Examining how trade unions anchor their environmental sustainability policies within their organisations, and how organised workers perceive their trade union's engagement with climate and environmental change as a political issue, Henriksson [47] finds that the formal anchorage of climate and environmental concerns in the form of passed policies within the trade union does not guarantee that members and shop stewards engage with material changes that account for ecological sustainability in the workplace. Insofar as the interviewees were engaged in climate and environmental issues, they did so in other roles than being a trade union member:

“I did not become a member of [the union] to become ‘greener’, as I can manage that somewhere else, in another arena” (interview with a union member, 2022).

That being said, all union members and shop stewards interviewed express willingness to participate in their trade union's environmental agenda if provided with knowledge and tools to engage in meaningfully in such processes.

Even in unions with relatively high-profile climate policies, their members express a lack of knowledge of and experience with the environmental work of their trade union, varying between those who are generally more interested in climate and environmentally related issues, and those who have a limited interest in such issues. While a member with no previous knowledge about her trade union's environmental agenda expresses that she fully supports the policies she gets presented with during the interview, another member from the same trade union is critical of what he perceives as weak language use in the policy document. To him, including climate and environmental change as a political issue in his trade union will not in itself result in material outcomes. Another union member asked how his trade union's policies could provide in terms of meaningful change:

“One must concretise what a green measure in the workplace could be. What can make the workplace more sustainable? I am open to getting some ideas myself.”

(interview with a trade union member)

A recurring theme in conversations with union members, which also mirrors the impression from our research at other scales of organisation, is that while policies and mandates at present are far from having the transformative impact intended, the promise is undeniable:

“I think that [the labour movement] has a huge potential to influence their members to sort of set a standard ... because it has a large effect on us members”

(interview with a union member)

7. Concluding discussion

How do Norwegian trade unions' efforts to make their mark on their country's just transition process affect how this process is perceived on the ground? And what difference do they make for the likelihood that Norway will meet its ambitious climate policy goals? In this article, we have this process of anchorage in direct relation to climate target compliance, was to be able to make a more sober assessment of the role of the labour movement in Norway – one that is not distracted by potentials, hypothetical outcomes and the optimistic rhetoric of the actors involved. Given this premise, we are forced to conclude that there is little indication that Norwegian trade unions play a decisive role in making Norway meet their climate targets.

How have we arrived at this conclusion? Firstly, because the labour movement continues to be divided between two competing visions for a just transition, characterised by Normann and Tellmann [13] as *transition within* versus *transition away from* fossil fuels. The ‘within’ vision

continues to have the upper hand in the main trade union confederation, as well as in tripartite social dialogue, and is granted legitimacy by the active support of the union rank-and-file in the oil and supply industries. Norwegian trade unions therefore play a deeply ambivalent role as an influencer of public policy (cf. [15]). As it is operationalised, the ‘within’ vision does not only fail to align with our country's 2030 emission targets, but also threatens to derail plans for green industrial development and renewable energy production required to put the country on a path to reach its long-term net-zero ambitions for 2050. An important contextual difference between Norway's embryonic just transition agenda and similar processes in Poland or Germany, is that Norway does not have a phase-out strategy in place. This implies that for Norwegian trade unions to further climate target compliance through their engagement, such an engagement must be based in an active environmental policy. Thus far, however, this engagement has rather focused on procedural justice. Their just transition agenda has thus far been confined to securing a place at the table.

Secondly, because Norwegian trade unions have yet to live up to their own expectations of being a decision-maker and implementer, to use Boasson et al.'s [15] terminology, of just transition processes in workplaces and communities. Such a role would require trade unions across the sectoral landscape to operationalise the concept in ways that have a transformative impact on labour processes throughout the economy. As we have shown, the various efforts done by trade unions and union confederations to make this happen has thus far led to the development of mandates, procedures and guides stretching from the national level and down to the individual workplace representatives. But there is very little evidence, at the time of writing, that these formal arrangements have an impact on the ground. This is where the process of anchorage and the process of climate target compliance implicate each other. Regardless of the many initiatives and the increased awareness around these issues across the labour movement, trade unions involved in the just transition agenda still struggle to anchor the agenda in its own activities. Without such anchoring, climate target compliance remains a lofty goal.

Of course, this can change. Many of our informants would stress that it is still early days, and that it would take years for sentences in documents to achieve their intended objectives in what is essentially a highly complex institutional system. The time frame in question is not set by slowness of our institutions, however, but by targets that are articulated by the urgency of the climate crisis. We would therefore urge other just transition scholar to do further investigations of processes of anchorage in Norway and in other contexts, to critically examine trade union involvement in climate mitigation policies. After all, a meaningful just transition cannot take place without anchorage in workers and their communities.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

David Jordhus-Lier: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Judith Marguerite Henriksson:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Camilla Houeland:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Genver Quirino:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Ingrid Andrea Holland:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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