

The labour-environment conflict. Comparing Just Transitions perspectives in two EU steel regions.

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The main challenge of heavy industry is nowadays the ecological transition. As the European societies committed themselves to the achievement of a net zero-economy for the 2050, and to a reduction of more than half of the emissions for the 2030 (with reference to the 1990's), European economies are expected to face major transformation. The achievement of socially just transition is expected to bring about several interrelated challenges, concerning in particular the balancing between the pursuing of social and environmental objectives. This article examines the labour-environment conflict in the context of ecological transition in two EU steel regions: Taranto ILVA in Italy and IJmuiden Koninklijke Hoogovens (now Tata Steel IJmuiden) in the Netherlands. Despite sharing similar challenges, the two regions differ significantly in their institutional frameworks, labour market dynamics, and socio-political contexts. In fact, on the one hand, an increasing demand for less polluting technologies is arising from the territories in which steel is produced; phasing out coal in the production process, and progressively integrating the blast furnace technology with the electric arc furnace, to which juxtaposes Direct Reduced Iron plants, will better the environmental performance of the steel plant and its impact on the local level pollution. On the other hand, this type of productive arrangement will cut the carbon dioxide emissions, progressively complying with the objective of the carbon neutrality set for the 2050 by the European Union. Also, in time, hydrogen-based technology might play a key role in the advancement of the environmental performance of this key production; but so far it is too soon to set out any scenario, due to the lack of information and industrial prototypes. If the path toward an “ecologisation” of the production is set, several interrogatives remain to answer. Above all, the most critical question mark is about the employment consequences this transition will have on the workforce implied in those plants that produce primary steel. In a dialogue with the literature on labour environmentalism, is then relevant to analyse the positions and priorities of organised labour, how trade unions conceptualise the challenges of the ecological transition and whether their perspective can be identified as belonging to one or another variety of “Just Transition”, meant as transformative approach aimed at framing a new balancing between environmental and social objectives. Also, it is worth investigating the inequalities profile that the ecological transition will produce on a local level, considering in particular the gap in skills, competences and qualification in the shift from a “brown” to a “green” job. Against that, the article is built around these two groups of research questions: i) How do local-level trade unions in Taranto and IJmuiden address the challenges of ecological transitions? ii) Do they relate to Just Transition? iii) Which are the most relevant differences? Why?; A) What are the possible labour market effects of a greening of the steel production process? B) Which are the most affected social groups? C) What consequences in terms of competences and skills? The hypothesis is that in the IJmuiden context, trade unions are more willing to embrace Just Transition related positions, as they operate in a more “favourable”

context, characterized by a labour market dynamic in which the employment will be reabsorbed in an easier manner, even in the case of a green restructuring of the plant, and the Polder model could work as a facilitator for this possibly conflictual pathway; conversely, for the Taranto case, the hypothesis is that trade unions will embrace a more conservative approach, due to the presence of a job-environment/health blackmail capable of producing pathdependence to economic diversification and conflictual yet inefficient socio-economic arena. Using a combination of quantitative data analysis and qualitative fieldwork (consisting in around 20 interviews between Taranto and Ijmuiden), and through the analytical lenses the eco-social-growth trilemma, this article aims: i) to understand how different institutional settlements influence actors' response to the challenges triggered by the ecological transition through the concept of Just Transition; ii) to map pathways for resolving the conflict between labour and environment, offering insights into potential policy implications, and addressing inequalities emerging from the ecological transition. The main research gap that this article seeks to fill regard the tracing of possible explanatory factors in the framing different Just Transition approaches of the trade unions, resulting in an innovative balancing between social and environmental objectives in their policy positions.