

# A Just Transition to a Green Economy: Evaluating the Response of Australian Unions

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## Abstract

*Many policymakers, unions, and businesses have embraced the idea of green jobs and a green economy. This enthusiasm for environmentally sound job creation received a significant shot in the arm at the end of 2008, in the context of the global financial crisis, as an important element in the solution to the world's economic and ecological concerns. The connection between work and combating environmental problems is however an area of significant contestation. This has resulted in highly varied understandings of what constitutes a green job and a just transition to a green economy. This article scrutinises the response of the Australian Council of Trade Unions—as the peak union body in Australia—and three specific unions to the challenge of transiting from the world of work towards an ecologically sustainable footing.*

## 1. Introduction

The Australian Labor Government has, at least in rhetoric, embraced the idea of shifting to green jobs and a green economy. This is epitomised by former Prime Minister Gillard, who in seeking to promote the benefits of the Labor government's policy to price carbon emissions stated: 'We are determined we will have a prosperous, low-pollution economy of the future. We are determined that we will have the jobs of the future' (Gillard 2011, p. 1428). The transition to a low-pollution economy is therefore presented as the next economic opportunity and a chance to create countless green jobs. Such a solution suggests that everybody will win in the political economy of green capitalism—the environment, the economy, and workers. This win-win green economic shift appears to gloss over important tensions between work and the environment.

There has long been a suspicion, particularly amongst workers and unions, that placing a higher emphasis on environmental issues does not bode well for jobs. This tension is often labelled the jobs versus the environment

conflict, where workers, unions, political parties, and businesses oppose environmental measures which are considered to harm production and profits, and therefore to threaten economic interests and jobs. This article explores these tensions by scrutinising the responses of the peak union body in Australia and three specific Australian unions to the environment work challenge; it discusses why unions adopt the environmental positions they hold.

The article begins by highlighting the jobs versus environment conflict and the variable responses of unions to environmental action. This is achieved by outlining the concept of a just transition and defining the term 'green job'. The article then examines the environmental policies of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), as the central union representative body, and the environmental engagement and responses of three specific unions: the Australian Manufacturers Workers Union (AMWU), the Australian Workers Union (AWU), and the Mining and Energy division of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). These three unions and the ACTU were selected because the leadership of each has been active within the political, economic, and environmental debate in Australia. The article finishes with a discussion of the research findings and future possibilities for union environmental responses.

## **2. Understanding the Jobs versus Environment Conflict**

The jobs versus environment tension can be understood by outlining labour's complex interaction with nature within the social relations of capitalist production, whereby labour power is employed to appropriate and transform objects of nature into commodities for the purpose of creating surplus value for the capitalist. The labour-nature interaction is therefore framed by the logic of capital accumulation, a logic which necessitates exponential growth of production. Postone notes that the competitive nature of capitalist production creates a 'treadmill effect', as capitalist enterprises seek to maximise profit through increased productivity, which 'increases the amount of value produced per unit of [labour] time' (Postone 1993, p. 289). This raised level of productivity in turn creates a new socially generalised standard of productivity, which becomes 'equal to that yielded by the older general level of productivity' (Postone 1993, p. 289). In other words, the treadmill effect explains that, to maintain profits, producers must constantly seek to expand production. For Schnaiberg (1980), the 'treadmill effect', or what he describes as the 'treadmill of production', explains the ecologically destructive character of capitalist production. This is because the drive for productivity and profit maximisation is generally achieved by investing in new technological production efficiencies (York, Rosa and Dietz

2003, p. 286; Schnaiberg and Gould 2000, p. 69). The constant expansion of production results in the continuous exploitation of natural resources, which also results in intensified pollution and the degradation of the environment, and limits the possibilities for environmental improvement (Gould, Pellow and Schnaiberg 2008; Schnaiberg, Pellow and Weinberg 2002; Konak 2008). Critically, workers and unions seeking to avoid job losses support capitalism's pursuit of exponential production, as expanding production maintains and creates jobs. It is this fundamental and continuous interaction within the operation of capitalist production and value creation that frames the conflicting relationship between labour and the environment.

### **3. The Move to a Green Economy: Introducing Union Responses**

Union responses to switching to a green economy and creating green jobs have thus far been characterised by the concept of a just transition to a green economy. Just transition is an important union response to the jobs versus environment challenge, which was first developed by the Canadian Labour Congress to promote a decent and just shift to green jobs and a green economy. The Canadian Labour Congress's search for equitable worker environmental outcomes therefore argues for 'a social climate change agenda focusing on developing a multi-levelled labour voice in the green transformation of jobs and work, with labour and community actively involved in planning, deciding and operationalising all phases' (Lipsig-Mumme 2008, p. 7). The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has also emphasised just transition as an instrument to create equitable environmental change.

Just transition is a tool the trade union movement shares with the international community, aimed at smoothing the shift towards a more sustainable society and providing hope for the capacity of a 'green economy' to sustain decent jobs and livelihoods for all (ITUC 2009, p. 1).

A just transition clearly seeks to resolve the divisive jobs versus environment problem; however, actual union commitments to what a just transition response constitutes can be assessed as variable and unclear.

To unpack this variability it is important to understand that union identities, strategies, and forms are diverse, and significant arguments exist as to the purpose of unions. For example the role that unions have played in promoting the interests of workers within the social relations of capitalism has been assessed by Bramble (2005) as limited: 'unions are institutions firmly located on the terrain of capitalism, devoted to improving the terms on which labour power is sold within the existing class system rather than

striving to transform it' (p. 74). This evaluation of unions is rather pessimistic and can be criticised for presenting a crude understanding of unionism within capitalist society, as it ignores complexities created by 'evidence of continuing resilience and even combativity in certain areas of employment' (Darlington 2010, p. 130). The analysis developed in this article assumes that union identities, forms, and strategies are the result of, or reflect, historically and geographically specific expressions of contradictory social relations and are, therefore, not homogeneous.

Hyman (2001) suggests that there are three ideal types of trade unionism models within capitalist society. The first is business unionism, which prioritises collective bargaining; advocates a mutual-gains agenda between business and union interests; and essentially holds to the belief that the primary purpose of unions is to secure improved economic outcomes for members. The second is social movement unionism, whereby unions operating within social democracy seek to socialise the capitalist economy, so that market forces and processes are moderated to achieve social justice and equity. The third is radical unionism, where unions focus on class conflict; pursue a militant anti-capitalist agenda; and seek to mobilise social political forces to promote working-class interests. Actual union identities, strategies, or responses are not uniform or static, but are a balance between contradictory tendencies, which pull in opposing directions, in different contexts and at different times. Thus, Hyman (2001, p. 165) asks the question: 'is a trade union a bargaining agent, a social partner, a mobilizer of discontent, or all of these at one and the same time?'. These complexities and contradictions are visible in the variable responses of unions to the idea of just transition. The approach taken in this article is to set out three just transition positions, which are not mutually exclusive, especially given Hyman's analysis of the complex and contradictory roles which unions play within contemporary capitalism, but nevertheless can be used to categorise roughly union responses to environmentally transiting the world of work.

The first just transition response can be labelled *passive transition*. This response views a green transition of work and the economy as a perceived natural outcome of political economic forces and technological change. This response sees unions cooperatively working with enterprises to achieve environmental improvements, which are aimed primarily at assisting the performance of the enterprise and therefore benefiting union members. A passive transition approach therefore shares links with a business-union model, as it negotiates environmental responses which prioritise economic objectives.

The second approach to just transition is a *minimalist position*, which 'emphasises reformist change with social protection, retraining and

consultation. The emphasis is defensive and shows a preoccupation with protecting jobs' (Cock 2011, p. 2). This approach sees unions actively engaged in seeking to reform market processes and outcomes ecologically, but with an overriding emphasis on protecting existing jobs.

Thus, this approach turns the environmental slogan 'first, do no harm' on its head, by resolutely pursuing the notion: first, do no harm to existing jobs. Ecologically reforming the political economic system is seen as achievable—that is green capitalism—but requires institutional cooperation and political intervention at the state, enterprise, and global levels. This approach can therefore be linked to some forms of non-radical social-movement unionism, as it seeks to reform capitalism and existing jobs ecologically.

The third just transition response is described as a *transformative transition* as it seeks to 'engage a different growth path and new ways of producing and consuming' (Cock 2011, p. 2). Such an approach argues that the current political economic system is incapable of achieving the changes required to deal with the environmental challenge and must be opposed. A transformative transition must therefore strive for an alternative system to be established—a system that places environmental and social needs first. Such an approach requires unions to become politically and socially active anti-capitalist forces at the sub-national, national, and international levels. This transformative anti-capitalist approach clearly shares links with the radical trade union model.

### ***The Green Job Problem***

There is also the problem of what is a green job? Providing a workable green jobs definition is problematic and the simple act of classifying a job as green does not ensure ecological benefits, create long-term equitable job opportunities, or transform existing jobs into environmentally sustainable well-paid jobs of the future. This research adopts a green-job typology, as shown below in Table 1. The typology is developed by Crowley (1999) and is an approach which places green jobs within a spectrum by dividing jobs into three distinct categories—light, mid, and deep green.

Light-green jobs can be understood as 'afterthoughts that are created by cleaning up and rehabilitating the mess we have made of the environment' (Crowley 1999, p. 1017). Light-green jobs are therefore primarily centred on land care, ecological restoration, and pollution control. The primary goals of light-green jobs are therefore employment and economic growth, not achieving significant environmental outcomes. Mid-green jobs target both ecological and employment objectives. Mid-green jobs could include renewable-energy jobs, jobs connected to the creation of an emission-

trading market or jobs involved in the greening of the automotive industry. In essence, mid-green jobs aim to reform the economy ecologically to achieve ecologically sustainable economic growth. Deep-green jobs have a ‘vision for ecologically responsible, socially desirable, culturally feasible and ethically defensible jobs’ (Crowley 1999, p. 1017). Deep-green jobs therefore require a ‘societal transformation’ that ‘jettison[s] the growth economy’ and ‘target[s] ecological concern’ (Crowley 1999, p. 1017). Importantly, these three green-job categories broadly align with the three union approaches to just transition, as are also identified in Table 1. While this typology does not provide a concrete definition of a green job, it does provide a framework within which the green credentials of occupations and policies can be identified and evaluated. It is, however, important to acknowledge that while the green-job definition and, indeed, the just transition categories are useful and necessary, they seek to describe a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is fundamentally ambiguous. As such, the typology should not be interpreted as a perfect representation of existing green jobs and just transition positions.

**Table 1: Green Jobs Typology with Just Transition**

	<b>Deep Green</b>	<b>Mid Green</b>	<b>Light Green</b>
<b>Mode</b>	Proactive	Integrative	Reactive
<b>Scope</b>	Long Term	Intermediate Term	Short Term
<b>Nature</b>	Transforming	Reforming	Conforming
<b>Objective</b>	Redefine Growth	‘Ecologise’ Growth	Enhance Growth
<b>Operation</b>	Rejectionist	Reinventionist	Accommodationist
<b>Aim</b>	Ecological Sustainability	Ecological Modernity	Sustainable Development
<b>Jobs</b>	Preserving Nature	Greening Industry	Remedying Ecological Decline
<b>Just Transition</b>	Transformative	Minimalist	Passive

Source: Based on Crowley (1999)

#### **4. Research Method**

Before exploring union responses to environmental transition and green-job creation it is necessary to describe briefly the research method. Data for analysing the responses of the ACTU and the three unions were obtained through the review of policy papers, union reports, and submissions. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with one union official from each of the ACTU, the AMWU, and the Mining and Energy division of the CFMEU. The CFMEU represents a range of different industries which have conflicting environmental viewpoints. For this reason, this research will focus on the Mining and Energy division of the union. Unfortunately, no representative from the AWU was willing to participate in the research. The union officials interviewed as part of this research all held positions within the leadership of each union and, as such, hold or are closely associated with decision-making within contemporary trade unions. Potential research participants were selected via criteria based on purposive sampling. The interview criteria for union officials required interviewees who not only had a strong interest in green jobs, but who were involved in shaping union environmental responses and policy. Access to these officials was gained through a process of direct personal contact or 'cold calling' via telephone and email, and the interviews were conducted between November 2010 and April 2011. The research aims to highlight the complex and conflicting views which exist within union leadership over green jobs and just transition. The interviews provided a space for listening to and engaging in understanding key informants with particular expertise in the research area (Morris 2009, p. 209; Richards 1996, p. 199; Blaikie 2000; Brower, Abolafia and Carr 2000). The interviews were topically focused, as the interviewees were asked to describe their background and particular involvement with environmental policy within the union, as well as their perspective, attitude, and opinions on the limitations and potential of the transition to a green economy and the creation of green jobs.

#### **5. Some Australian Union Responses to Transiting from the World of Work to the Green Economy**

In analysing the response of the ACTU and the three unions in relation to moving to a green economy, the following discussion is divided into three sections. The first section examines the formal environmental transition and green-job-creation policy positions of the three unions and the ACTU. Next, the discussion turns to outlining the views presented by union officials in the interviews. The primary purpose of the interview data presented here is to gain an understanding that formal union environmental positions can gloss over important tensions and contradictions within the leadership

of unions. The third aspect of this analysis explores union environmental responses in practice.

### ***Union Policy on Environmental Transition and Green Jobs***

The ACTU and AMWU have both, in formal policy papers and reports, championed the economic and job benefits of shifting to a green economy. In 2008, the ACTU released a report entitled 'Green Gold Rush: How Ambitious Environmental Policy Can Make Australia a Leader in the Global Race for Green Jobs'. The report argues that strong action on climate change and green industries could create 500,000 jobs by 2030, and 'help secure Australia's economic prosperity' (ACTU 2008, p. 2). It suggests that the potential for a 'Green Gold Rush' relies on the state developing and facilitating a long-term environmental industry framework; the state creating an environmental market, such as an emissions-trading scheme (ETS), while also strengthening industry codes and standards; and the state increasing investment in environmental research, technologies, skills, and training (ACF and ACTU 2008, p. 4). The ACTU, in a more recent report, 'Climate Change is Union Business', stated that these same environmental policies could create 770,000 new jobs by 2030 (ACTU 2011a, p. 7). These policies and industry measures can be seen to align with a minimalist just transition approach, which is supportive of mid-green job creation.

Likewise, the AMWU (2008) in its report 'Making Our Future: Just Transitions for Climate Change Mitigation', endorsed a range of policies that fit with a minimalist transition. For example, the AMWU report called for state assistance to retool existing manufacturing industries; income support for workers affected by environmental policies; investment in R and D; training programs for new green manufacturing industries; the adoption of a carbon tariff on imports to Australia to promote local green industries; and the right for unions to negotiate environmental responsibility into labour contracts (AMWU 2008, p. 20-21). The AMWU positive disposition towards mid-green job opportunities and moving to a green economy can in part be understood to be about self-preservation in a context where manufacturing, and employment in manufacturing, has significantly decreased in Australia over the last 25 years and is continuing to shrink (ABS 2006; Australian Industry Group and Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2011).

Since the early 1990s, the Mining and Energy division of the CFMEU has recognised the need for action on environmental issues such as climate change (Rafferty and Yu 2009, p. 16). More recently, the union has supported a strategy to price carbon emissions, government regulation to increase the production of renewable energy, and the development and deployment of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology (CFMEU Mining and



Energy 2007; 2008; 2010). Advocacy for CCS is unsurprising, as the union's membership is predominantly involved in coal mining and power generation. For this reason, the union has also argued that 'the phase-out option [of coal mining] would require the ending of the nation's most successful and valuable export industry, and would inflict immense social costs' (CFMEU 2008, p. 12). The Mining and Energy division of the CFMEU has therefore attached great hope to the development and deployment of CCS technology, a technology which would guarantee the current jobs of its members in the highly polluting coal and electricity industries. The leadership of the CFMEU has also expressed scepticism towards green-job creation. Indeed, Tony Maher, General President of the CFMEU Mining and Energy division and chair of the ACTU climate change group, has labelled the notion of a green job 'dopey' (Maher 2009, p. 6). These views suggest that the union's environmental position primarily aligns with the passive just transition to a green economy and light-green job creation, as the union cautiously supports environmental policies which protect their members' immediate interests. The AWU is one union which is deeply fearful about the impact of environmental policy on its members. This is evident in the AWU (2008) position paper on climate change, which argued that any moves to reduce greenhouse gas emission could undermine the interests of its members and the industries in which they work. In the light of the Australian Government's climate-change policies, the AWU, in association with highly polluting companies, demanded that workers and corporations involved in emissions-intensive trade-exposed (EITE) industries be protected against environmental policies through compensation. In addition, the AWU has mischievously claimed that work in the steel industry should be classified as a green job, because steel is recyclable and is a necessary component of renewable energy technologies such as wind turbines (Howes and Leahy 2009, p. 12). According to the AWU, the only sensible solutions to climate change are market-based policies and technological fixes that enhance Australia's economic growth (2008). The AWU official position, at best, aligns with passive just transition and light-green job creation.

### *Environmental Views Presented by Union Officials*

The ACTU representative interviewed in this research communicated a somewhat different view of green jobs than the positive vision expressed within ACTU reports and policy papers. The interviewee considered green jobs to be an unhelpful concept, as it generated a specific environmental image which alienates many unions, union members, and the industries in which they work:

I don't think in terms of green jobs because it's misleading and narrows the approach to the change in industry and jobs that could

come about because [of] the reaction to climate change ... it's not helpful because you end up alienating a whole group of workers from the discussion ... green jobs is to those people working in the old industries your dirty if you're working in the coal industry or aluminium, you don't see that it's a green job or possibly could be ... that language is not helpful to unions to be able to engage with members.

Concern that the green-job label is 'misleading', 'alienating', 'not helpful', and 'narrow' is in clear contrast to the language of 'green gold rush' and 'economic prosperity' expressed in recent ACTU reports. It also suggests that union engagement with green jobs, from the perspective of the ACTU representative, has to be focused on job security for union members.

The ACTU representative also expressed scepticism and concern over the high-wage, high-skill idealism which surrounds green jobs and the transition to a green economy:

You know this green job thing it reminds [me] a bit of the IT revolution where we were led to believe ... there were all these ... whiz kids being paid enormous sums of money ... they were up there and then there were a lot of other people down here. Employers don't need everyone to be highly qualified, they will have an elite group of highly qualified workers and then the rest are on shit, the shit hack work, and that's the danger in getting everyone into 'so called' green jobs.

Again, this cautionary response noticeably contradicts the positive vision outwardly expressed by the ACTU. Connecting green jobs with the post-industrial knowledge-economy arguments advanced in Australia in the 1990s (see for example Marceau, Manley and Sicklen 1997; Mathews 1999) also points to a strong scepticism about mid-green jobs and a minimalist transition providing a high road to a sustainable economy. Indeed, these comments indicate the improbability of any form of just transition. The ACTU representative was mindful that the union movement in Australia plays a crucial role in creating and communicating environmental awareness in the workplace and community:

There are close to 2 million union members in this country and we can reach their families and friends ... and raise their consciousness about the need to treat the environment with care, more sensible practices in our workplaces and look at how work is done.

Alongside this acknowledgement, the ACTU engagement with the environment, workplaces, and green jobs remains underdeveloped. The following statement by the ACTU representative suggests that the ACTU is

unsure as to how it should approach the environment, unsure if the environment and green jobs are really core union business:

I don't think we [ACTU] have a green job policy as such and I think that's what we are working out at the moment in a practical sense. What are we going to do as a union in this next period of time, what's our agenda? Part of that is industry policy around jobs, industries, communities, decent work and workers' rights.

The AMWU perspective that 'going green' could be a momentous opportunity for Australian manufacturers was reiterated by the representative from the AMWU:

As markets move more and more towards satisfying customer demand for high environmental standards, jobs and companies that have a very high environmental standard ... find it easier to achieve those standards ... you could become a country of choice in a global sense, or you could become an employer, or an industry of choice at a local or national level.

Significantly, the AMWU representative at no point mentioned the minimalist just transition approach strongly promoted in the AMWU report. Instead, the interviewee focused on consumption and the market mechanism:

I think that people are underestimating the power of the consumer and the marketplace for jobs that have a very high environmental standard and [the] work, industries and products that come from that ... it's critical to put a price on carbon and I think that is one of the single most important factors in securing work and securing jobs in this country.

This view suggests that a transition to a green economy be negotiated on the market's terms and through consumption, not through the direct-action policies outlined in the AMWU report. Moreover, the AMWU representative did not advocate an active leadership role for unions in planning and operationalising the green shift that the minimalist just transition approach of the AMWU report suggests:

The unions, government and private sector will work collectively, and that's how the new industries will come into place. As things evolve the unions will be integrated into them.

The representative from the Mining and Energy division of the CFMEU interviewed in this research acknowledged that the union's support for a price on carbon emissions is based on the fact that 80 per cent of coal mined by its members is exported and 'this export demand will continue to grow

on the back of demand from China'. The representative also reasserted the Mining and Energy division's faith in CCS, stating that it is the 'only viable solution' to reducing emissions from the use of coal. In a similar vein to the ACTU representative, and the public statements from the General President of the CFMEU Mining and Energy division, the interviewee from the CFMEU noted the 'rubbery' nature of green jobs and highlighted the two major concerns the union has with the promotion of green jobs. First, environmental groups and the government consistently state that there is a need to create green jobs and to change existing jobs. While the union acknowledges that some new jobs will be created, most current jobs will be maintained. This suggests that the union does not engage with a strong notion of transition or a transformative green-job agenda. Second, the union is primarily concerned with keeping jobs in Australia and 'extreme responses like de-industrialisation' in reaction to environmental issues would be disastrous for workers. This notion of de-industrialisation seems curious, given that no political party or union is promoting a policy of de-industrialisation and it may be an indication of the jobs versus environment panic that often accompanies environmental action. This also indicates that the major objective of the union is securing the immediate interests of its members. When questioned about how this response sat with the ACTU's strong policy support for green jobs, the CFMEU representative stressed that the ACTU, as the central union representative body, is 'removed from the coalface' and, as such, at times fails to understand environmental issues from the perspective of workers.

### *Unions' Environmental Positions in Practice*

The response of the ACTU and the three unions to the Australian Government's carbon-tax legislation provides an insight into each union's environmental position in practice. Before exploring these positions, a brief description of the carbon tax is essential. The carbon tax is the central feature of the Labor Government's 'Securing a Clean Energy Future' program (Australian Government 2011). The tax requires approximately 500 of Australia's largest polluting businesses to pay a price for every ton of carbon emitted by them into the atmosphere. The pricing of these emissions will be implemented in two stages. The first stage of the pricing mechanism is a fixed-price period, where the price per ton of emissions is set by the government. This period commenced on 1 July 2012 and runs for two years. The starting price for the first period will be \$23 per ton and it will increase every year by 2.5 per cent. The second stage, beginning on 1 July 2014, sees the pricing mechanism convert to an ETS and linked with the European Union ETS. The price will no longer be fixed by the Government but will be determined by the market.

The ACTU was quick to support the carbon-tax legislation; nevertheless, it was also 'absolutely determined' to ensure that jobs and affected industries

were protected (Hepworth and Maher 2011, p. 6). This position strongly reinforces the idea that the ACTU is primarily focused on securing the economic interests of the existing trade union membership, a focus which can clearly lead to conflicts between workers and the environment. The ACTU engagement with and commitment to a green-job policy agenda is also muddled by its institutional and political alignment with the Australian Labor Party. This can be seen in the ACTU's regular support for, or confinement to, policy positions which are not at odds with the current Australian Labor Government's green jobs and environmental policy setting. For example, the ACTU has supported the Labor Government's light-green job programs (2009), carbon tax (ACTU 2011a), and efforts to protect mining-industry jobs from a carbon price (ACTU 2011b; Hepworth and Maher 2011, p. 6). The ACTU representative interviewed for this research also supported the Labor Government's approach, arguing that the 'Labor Party realises' the big issues that are connected with the shift to a low-carbon economy.

The AMWU has also backed carbon-tax compensation for EITE industries which the AMWU represents (Oliver 2011). Similarly, Tony Maher, from the CFMEU Mining and Energy division, responded to the carbon-tax legislation with the warning that blue-collar workers would revolt if their jobs were not protected: 'blue-collar workers won't be salami-sliced on job security' (Coorey 2011, p. 4). This concern is also central to the position of Paul Howes, — he AWU National Secretary: 'if one job is gone, our support (for the carbon tax) is gone' (Shanahan 2011, p. 1). The potential adverse impact on local communities if carbon emissions are priced has also been strongly asserted. Wayne Hanson — South Australian Secretary of the AWU — claimed that the carbon tax would result in the industrial centres of Whyalla and Port Pirie being 'wiped off the map' (Kenny and Hockley 2011, p. 1).

The Labor Government did commit to a comprehensive industrial compensation package, which effectively negated the economic cost of the carbon tax for a range of highly polluting industries in which the AMWU, CFMEU, and AWU are involved. The package provides compensation to high EITE industries, such as aluminium and steel producers, by providing free permits for 94.5 per cent of carbon emissions; lower EITE industries, such as plastics and chemicals, will also receive 66 per cent of carbon-emissions permits free; and compensation is also provided to EITE sectors of the economy via a \$9.2 billion 'Jobs and Competitiveness Program' (Australian Government 2011, pp. 50-57). The compensation is primarily directed towards protecting a 'business as usual' approach and not towards transiting the industry and its workforce. Indeed, this compensation has not only protected some of highest carbon-emitting industries in Australia, but recent research shows that it may provide a financial windfall of between

\$400 million and \$1 billion to the dirtiest brown-coal-fired power stations in Australia (Taylor and Wroe 2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, the compensation package was described by the AMWU leadership as a ‘win for industry and environment’ (Oliver 2011). This suggests that when industries and jobs are potentially on the line, the ACTU and AMWU were not so committed to pursuing the minimalist just transition and mid-green job agenda that their climate-change reports endorse; instead, both quickly moved into a defensive mode.

The AWU and CFMEU also came out in support of the carbon tax after the government committed to the large industrial compensation package; however, the AWU’s disinterest in the environment was made abundantly clear by Paul Howes on the day the union announced its support for the carbon tax:

We have given support to this package today. Not because we are some ratbag bunch of environmentalists and really want to deal with this issue, but frankly because we believe that they’ve developed a package which will ... ensure that the 85 per cent of AWU members who work in emissions-intensive trade-exposed industries jobs will be protected (ABC 2011).

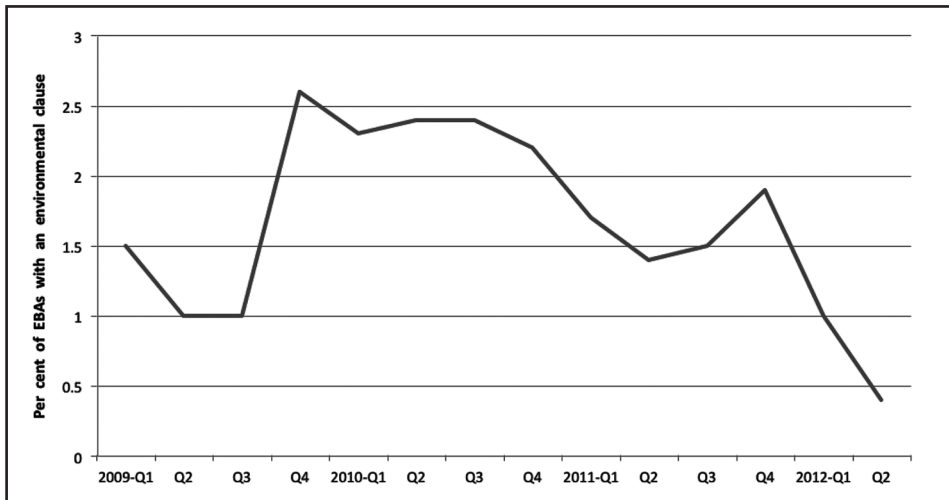
There is also the broader question of whether or not unions within modern capitalist societies include action on environmental issues, such as climate change, as a core union issue worth pursuing at the bargaining level. For instance, the AWU appears disinterested in the environment; by contrast, the AMWU is seeking an Accord-like shift to a green economy.<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) suggest that unions are placing a negligible emphasis upon the importance of environmental issues at the enterprise bargaining level. Since 1 January 2009, only 1.6 per cent of all Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) contain any mention of an environmental clause (2012, personal communication with DEEWR, 10 October). Half of all EBAs with an environmental clause are located in the construction and manufacturing industries, and yet EBAs with an environmental clause still only represent 3.9 per cent and 5 per cent of construction and manufacturing agreements, respectively (2012, personal communication with DEEWR, 10 October). There is a strong correlation between union-negotiated agreements and environmental clauses, with 903 of the 1105 EBAs recorded containing an

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<sup>1</sup>The Accord refers to a series of Prices and Incomes Accords which were signed industrial relations agreements between the Labor Party and the ACTU that effectively ensured that the union movement would be supportive of the Labor Government’s macroeconomic neoliberal policy agenda (Cahill 2005, p. 9; Kaptein 1993, pp. 98-103).

environmental clause in union-negotiated agreements. Nevertheless, the data obtained from DEEWR also indicate that EBAs containing environmental clauses are not increasing but are seemingly on the decline. This is shown below in Figure 1. There are also considerable variations as to what these environmental clauses seek to achieve. For example at the negligible end of the scale, some agreements contain financial bonuses for employees if no safety or environmental breaches are recorded within a given time period (Fair Work Australia 2011, p. 30). While still limited, more progressive EBAs contain environmental clauses which commit to improving the environmental sustainability and carbon emissions of the enterprise via regular environmental surveys, equipment upgrades, and other initiatives developed in consultation with union representatives (Fair Work Australia 2010, p. 6). Although the ACTU claims that ‘climate change is union business’ (2011a, p. 1), the response of interviewees, unions, union policy papers, reports, and EBA data suggest that the environment is a long way from being established as a core union issue within the three Australia unions examined here.

**Figure 1: EBAs with an Environmental Clause as a Percentage of All Quarterly Agreements**



Source: Personal communication with DEEWR, 10 October 2012.

## 6. Discussion

The question whether or not unions include the confrontation of environmental problems as core union business links back to the question of what role unions play within the social relations of capitalism? The ACTU and the three unions discussed here present a range of complex and critical contradictions. Both the ACTU and AMWU have formally emphasised an

active union engagement through a minimalist just transition response, a position that the ACTU and AMWU interviewees appeared, at best, less committed to, and at worst, openly hostile towards. On the contrary, the AWU appears to demonstrate little commitment to the idea that environmental issues are core union business and instead resolutely pursues a mutual-gains agenda between business and union interests, regardless of the environmental costs. The position of the CFMEU Mining and Energy division is highly pragmatic; it suggests that an environmental shift is important, but such a transition should in no way have a negative impact—principally in the form of job losses—on the interests of workers in highly polluting industries. In practice, the complex, variable, and contradictory positions of the ACTU and these three unions towards a just transition and green-job creation quickly became unified in the face of the Australian Government's response to climate change and the potential impact of this response on existing jobs. It was this united job-defensive position on the carbon-tax legislation, a response that also echoed the concerns of capital (Mineral Council of Australia 2011; Crowe 2011), which provides the strongest evidence that the unions examined here are currently pursuing a passive just transition. Thus, it is painless for peak union bodies, such as the ACTU, and unions such as the AMWU, to talk about a just transition response and hundreds of thousands of green jobs being created within policy blueprints; such positions quickly become hollow when they are contradicted by union leaders and not applied in practice.

This analysis shows that the job versus environment dichotomy, discussed at the beginning of the article, continues to be an overriding challenge for unions. In seeking green-job creation and a just transition that avoids any jobs losses, the unions examined appear to support only environmental solutions which maintain the treadmill of production. It is this fundamental and continuous commitment to the treadmill of production that frames and helps to explain the job-defensive just transition positions which unions adopt in relation to environmental action.

## **7. Conclusion: What Can Unions Do?**

The above assessment invariably leads to the question—how can unions respond? As has been highlighted throughout this article, the concept of just transition has become the overriding union response to the environmental challenge and its impact on the world of work. However, as outlined here different unions have variable understandings of what constitutes just transition. Although union strategies or responses to the environment are neither uniform nor static, the three identifiable forms of just transition



highlight important possibilities for how unions can respond to environmental challenges into the future.

The passive transition response provides unions with a business as usual approach—a response which prioritises the expansion of production and the existing jobs of union members over environmental improvements. Indeed, the views and actions of the AWU and Mining and Energy division of the CFMEU exhibit this passive response by suggesting that technologies and improved environmental practices will simply evolve as part of the transition to a greener economy. Thus, the passive union response can only accept environmental change to the world of work if it protects the immediate interests of workers, industry, and the pace of the treadmill. Ultimately, a passive response leaves the challenges of jobs versus the environment and a shift to a green economy unresolved.

The second possible union response, the minimalist position, seeks a reformist move to a green economy. This response was encapsulated in the AMWU report, *Making Our Future: Just Transitions for Climate Change Mitigation* (2008). The AMWU's promotion of state protection for transforming industries, financial support to retrain affected workers, and the development of a market mechanism to help promote a green shift within the economy all fit within the minimalist model. Although this response is still concerned with defending jobs and the treadmill of production, it does actively promote ecological reform of existing market processes and outcomes, and is a significant step forward from the passive union response which has to date characterised the environmental practices and positions of the unions examined here. While a minimalist transition and mid-green jobs seek to deal with jobs versus the environment by ecologically restructuring capitalism—the goal of this transition—green capitalism is ecologically problematic. The fundamental logic of capitalism, green or otherwise, appears irreconcilable with ecological sustainability, as explained by the treadmill of production. Thus, there appear to be serious limits to a minimalist just transition ultimately delivering ecological sustainability and resolving job versus environment tensions.

In their analysis of union responses to environmental problems, Rathzel and Uzzell (2011, p. 1221) draw attention to the fact that union representatives do not 'talk about labour and nature as equally necessary sources of wealth'. Similarly, both the passive and minimalist union responses also ignore nature as a necessary source of wealth and seek to defend contemporary forms of capitalist production. This, according to Rathzel and Uzzell (2011, p. 1222), demonstrates the existence of an environmental rift within union policy, as labour unions have reduced nature to 'a means for meeting human needs',

presenting the exploitation of nature as a job opportunity. Overcoming this underlying rift within the social relations of capitalism therefore requires unions to 'conceptualise nature as a partner in human development instead of seeing it as a victim' (Rathzel and Uzzell 2011, p. 1222). Considering the labour-nature relationship in this way will, according to Rathzel and Uzzell (2011, p. 1222), enable a shift away from policies which subordinate the environment to economic priorities. This suggestion of reconceptualising the labour-nature relationship to move away from economic priorities sits within and complements the transformative just transition response. A transformative union response seeks to promote a shift from the treadmill of production to a political-economic system that places environmental and social needs first.

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