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Culture workers against big oil: the importance of labor education in fighting the climate crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for the importance of labor education in fighting the climate crisis, a vital form of education too often overlooked in the climate movement. Drawing on a case study of unionized culture workers in the United Kingdom, the article seeks to show the distinctive embedded nature of labor education. Success of labor education on the climate crisis hinges not so much on a particular pedagogy or curriculum in any one classroom setting, but on the ways in which a range of formal and informal educational actors and spaces work together across the labor and environmental movements, as part of a mobilizing project that seeks to link worker interests directly to the climate crisis, and identify actions that workers can take to address the crisis effectively. Labor education has a central role to play in ensuring a just transition in the move away from a fossil fuel based economy.

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In October 2022, the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) Culture Group, which represents museum, gallery and heritage workers across the United Kingdom, issued a press release criticizing the environmental activist group Just Stop Oil for throwing tomato soup on Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* painting in the National Gallery in London. The Van Gogh soup attack was part of a series of provocative and disruptive acts that Just Stop Oil had been carrying out to attract media and public attention to the climate crisis. These are 'methods that have been used in almost every successful civil resistance campaign,' such as 'the Civil Rights Movement, the Suffragettes, the queer movement,' the Just Stop Oil soup activists explained later: 'All it took was two young people to throw soup at a painting to get people talking more than they have done in such a long time about the climate crisis' (Holland, Plummer, and Durban 2022). But the PCS Culture Group was not impressed. We send 'sympathy and solidarity to our members working in security and front of house at the gallery,' the PCS Group wrote: 'Attacking our shared national heritage is not a constructive way to achieve' climate justice, and climate activists should 'come up with ways of protesting that do not conflict with our members' duties and responsibility for keeping art and culture safe for the public to enjoy' (PCS Culture Group 2022b).

At first glance, this appears to be another example of a recurring divide between trade unions and environmental activists in addressing the climate crisis (e.g. Goodfellow & Natarajan 2021). Gallery workers should 'just stand back and let us get on with this,' Just Stop Oil activists told the PCS Culture Group, who, according to a PCS union rep, in turn felt the activists were

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being 'a bit patronizing.' It's our members 'who've got to clean all that up' after, says a Trades Union Congress (TUC) educator. But actually, something different was going on here, which was about two conflicting visions of what constitutes effective climate justice education and action. The complaint of the PCS Culture Group was not that Just Stop Oil was taking action on the climate crisis, but rather that they were abandoning a vital, alternative model of climate education and action, that seeks to engage and mobilize workers, instead of ignoring, alienating and creating more work for them. For the past decade, trade unionists and environmental activists in the UK culture sector have built relationships, developed shared understandings, and taken action together on the climate crisis, focusing in particular on ending fossil fuel sponsorship of all cultural institutions in the country. Our members, the PCS Culture Group (2022b) noted, 'face the same challenges presented by the climate emergency as everyone else,' and have 'worked fruitfully ... with climate protest organisations' and 'repeatedly passed motions [at union conferences] supporting the aims of climate change protests.'

Culture sector workers may not seem the most likely lead actors for worker climate action; indeed, when labor and environment collaboration is considered, attention is more often focused on groups like energy sector workers (e.g. Huber 2022). But in this article, I argue there is much we can learn about the importance and nature of effective labor education and action for fighting the climate crisis by looking at the example of unionized culture workers in the UK. For not only is this a successful example of labor-environment education and action in its own right, it highlights many of the key elements that have been important for fostering effective labor education and action on the climate crisis across the UK labor movement. In particular, the case of PCS and the culture sector shows the importance of recognizing how effective labor education is embedded in a range of sites and practices across a broad union structure and worker movement. It shows the role played by environmental activists, rank and file union activists, and national union staff in fostering labor education and action on the climate crisis; the catalyzing influence of mass mobilization against the fossil fuel industry, notably the rise of the anti-fracking movement; as well as the essential task of linking worker interests directly to the climate crisis, and identifying clear targets and actions that workers can focus on to address the climate crisis effectively. Without the presence of all these elements, it is likely that labor education and action in the UK culture sector on the climate crisis would not have been as successful as it has been.

Trade unions, climate crisis & a just transition

A growing number of climate crisis scholars and activists argue that to facilitate the radical social and economic transformations that are required to address the climate crisis effectively, workers, organized and mobilized through the trade union movement, will need to play a central role. Trade unions have been one of the 'most powerful and enduring vehicles' for mobilizing for radical social change, since organized workers, 'by withdrawing their labour or disrupting key sites of economic production, ... have the power to extract demands from capital and governments' (Saltmarsh 2020, 136). The historical record of fundamental shifts in social and economic policy, such as the New Deal in the United States, suggests that 'major progressive reforms can only be won under capitalism by massive working-class organization and disruption' (Brown, et al. 2019). 'Labor's power has always come from its ability to bring business as usual to a halt,' write Aronoff, et al. (2019, 92), and 'we need that power more than ever today, because business as usual threatens life on earth.' Writers in this emergent labor climate movement literature seek the mobilization of a similar set of social forces that brought about the New Deal, to help fight for a Green New Deal that can address combined climate, social and economic crisis today.

Though this argument is compelling in theory, in practice, it faces a number of key challenges. One is the weakened state of trade unions today, as trade union membership in the

UK, like in many other countries, has declined over the last four decades, with just over 23% of the workforce belonging to a trade union in 2021 (BEIS 2022). Another issue is that, as Kalt (2022, 500) points out, unions are 'neither natural opponents ... nor are they natural allies of environmental movements,' but 'adopt a diversity of transition strategies ranging from reactive and defensive approaches that protect the status quo to proactive and supportive approaches that advance green and just transitions.' Sometimes, unions may be concerned with a different set of priorities to climate activists, as they seek to support wages, working conditions and immediate well-being for their members; while at other times, they may see climate policy and action as threatening job loss and erosion of wages and working standards, or more generally, failing to take into account the needs, interests and insights of workers (Vachon 2023).

In the labor and environment movement, the concept of just transition is one of the most important frameworks for linking environment and labor concerns together. The just transition concept has a wide range of meanings, from managerialist to more radical and transformative interpretations, leading some to dismiss the term as a 'contested concept' and 'false solution' that 'has been interpreted and adapted more or less freely according to the interests at stake' (Azzi 2021, 235, 243; Stevis, Morena, and Krause 2019, 5). But the concept is useful in at least two respects. One is that 'for any transition to be truly just, it must have the full support and faith of the workers that will be dependent on it,' and this means that the 'participation of workers and their organizations' in any development of a just transition plan is essential (Vachon 2021, 122). A second is that the 'transformative, emancipatory and subversive potential' of the just transition concept 'comes from the fact that the just transition is both aspirational and grounded in people's everyday lives and struggles' (Stevis, Morena, and Krause 2019, 5). The concept provides a focus for thinking 'about what we should be doing in the face of a worsening ecological crisis,' as envisioning a just transition 'means having to answer three fundamental questions: why is the world we live in not desirable anymore, what world do we want and how to get from here to there?' (Laurent 2019). Azzi (2021, 228) describes the just transition concept as 'a pedagogical tool of workers education' and 'concrete framework for building bridges of dialogue,' something to be learned and developed through campaigning efforts over time, such as those undertaken by unionized culture workers and their climate activist allies described in this article.

In the UK, as elsewhere, much of the discussion of just transition has focused on industrial workers in high carbon sectors, who are threatened with job loss and community dislocation by climate action and policy (e.g. Harris, Jeliakov, and Morrison 2023). But in developing a labor climate movement and outlining a comprehensive vision for a just transition, other sectors are also important. Recent calls for a 'Green New Deal for Care' and a 'Feminist Green New Deal,' for example, argue that concepts of just transitions and green jobs need to be broadened, such that care work is revalued and recognized as a vital form of 'climate work' and 'integral part of a transition to a green economy' (Battistoni 2022; Cohen and MacGregor 2020, 19). The wave of teacher strikes in the United States, and adoption of 'bargaining for the common good' platforms, in which unionized education workers make demands for climate as well as improved pay and benefits, is also seen as a promising front in pushing for a just transition and Green New Deal (Brown, et al. 2019; Hutt 2022). The culture sector, which is the focus of this article, is an important site for just transition and labor climate mobilization, for several reasons. Culture is a key terrain in the 'battle for hearts and minds,' for making sense of the world in which we live, challenging prevailing values, ideals and narratives, and creating alternative visions for the future: as Klein and Crabapple (2019) write, 'cultural production played an absolutely central role during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s,' and will likely be just as important in helping to shape a Green New Deal and just transition today. The culture sector is an arena in which climate activists have been active over an extended period of time, as they have sought to shift public consciousness by stigmatizing and delegitimizing fossil fuel companies with campaigns against fossil fuel sponsorship and investment. As such, there is much that can

be learned from this experience about what has been effective in building strong relationships with workers. Finally, as will be discussed below, in the neoliberal era, public funding cutbacks and privatization in the culture sector have opened the door to fossil fuel sponsorship, meaning that culture workers now often have a direct relationship with fossil fuel companies, beyond their indirect ties as energy suppliers for sector infrastructure.

The nature and importance of labor education

If workers are to be able to play a key role in a global climate movement, and if the outlines of a just transition are to be secured, then a sustained and transformative program of worker education on the climate crisis will be essential – an education that can help workers ‘connect the dots to see the solutions to all our crises of climate, health care, and housing require building mass social power to combat the industries profiting from these very crises,’ and ‘see their struggle against management as an environmental struggle’ (Huber 2019). Worker education, as Orr writes (2021, 499), ‘is a crucial element in the rebuilding of working class perspectives and organised collective responses to the enormous socio-economic and ecological challenges’ of our time. Here again, there a number of challenges. Like the labor movement in general, labor education today is widely described as being in a state of decline (Dolgon and Roth 2021; Orr 2021; Seal 2017).

In England, state funding of adult, worker and trade union education has been cut dramatically: as a result, the number of colleges hosting trade union education centers has plummeted over the last decade from more than sixty to about a dozen; and some smaller unions have lost the ability to offer labor education to their members (I explore this issue elsewhere – see Tannock 2023). A decade of austerity has also made it more difficult for workers to take time off work to attend labor education courses. Further, in the UK, as elsewhere around the world, there has been a narrowing of focus and shift in vision in much trade union education from more radical, political models focused on broad social transformation to depoliticized forms of technical training for performing union roles and ‘skills development for individual mobility’ (Orr 2021, 501; see also Cooper 2020). As former General Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) Doug Nicholls (2017, 8) writes, ‘the educational nature of trade unionism [in the UK] has had the stuffing pulled out of it by years of low-level, outcomes-driven, purely functional training.’ In other words, precisely the kind of (political) education that is needed now to help build a worker climate movement is less readily available. There is a pressing need to rebuild and revitalize labor education in the UK, as elsewhere.

A further set of challenges has to do with the embedded nature of (effective) labor education. Labor education (or workers’ education) refers to ‘education for workers, controlled by workers and their organisations for their own needs and purposes’ (Orr 2021, 498). Labor education is an embedded form of education, in two respects. First, what Welton (1991) refers to as ‘labour’s schools’ include formally organized classrooms and curriculum, but also informal learning that can take place ‘across a rich variety of sites linked to organising, mobilising and social action,’ including practices such as ‘recruiting new members, meetings and congresses, participating in wage bargaining or policy forums, running campaigns, protest marches and strike action’ (Cooper 2020, 118). As Fisher (2017, 24) argues, informal learning through ‘conversations in the workplace between the experienced worker and the novice,’ or ‘hard lessons learned through the failure or success of a particular episode of industrial action or similar event’ tends to play ‘just as important a part in the development of the individual trade unionist and of the unions and the movement as the formal system’ of trade union education. Labor education is thus embedded in wide range of practices that may not be recognized by participants as being educational in nature (Foley 2001).

Labor education, like social movement learning more generally, is also embedded in a broader movement or struggle. Labor education, writes Orr (2021, 503), 'is a distinct form of education' that 'is oriented towards building working class and worker organisation for the purpose of social transformation' and 'to advance workers' struggles.' As such, the value, power and significance of labor education greatly depends on how it is embedded within a broader union structure or worker movement, and connected to other kinds of education and action occurring across the union, the movement or the struggle. In the literature on social movement learning, this embedding in struggle has been discussed in different ways. Langdon (2011, 149) points to the importance of tracing the 'trajectories of learning' in struggle that develop within and across social movements. Choudry (2012, 144, 150) likewise emphasizes the importance of 'incremental informal learning' that is developed throughout a social movement, or what he calls 'low profile, long-haul political education and organising work.'

These characteristics – being embedded in social practice and broader, collective struggle – present challenges for researchers, practitioners and activists alike. For whether one is a researcher trying to understand the kinds of (effective) labor education that may be happening, or a labor educator, organizer or activist trying to develop programs of effective labor education, there is a need to look well beyond formal classrooms and practices that are directly labelled as 'education.' 'Problems ... arise when workers' education is seen as something discrete, to be studied and developed in isolation,' Allais (2021, 496) observes: 'The possibilities offered by workers' education, whether more radical, workerist or professional, can only benefit workers collectively if they are linked to and part of worker struggles and organising and not a separate, or add-on, to these.'

Research methods

The article is based on a qualitative research study investigating the kinds of effective and transformative climate change education that are being developed and put into practice by trade unions and other worker organizations in the UK. The key research questions of the study were to try to understand: What strategies and models of worker climate change education are being adopted? What are the principal successes and challenges of this work? How are worker interests being linked to the climate crisis? How is a shared vision of what a just transition should look like being developed? How is climate change education linked to collective action and projects of building worker power in the workplace and beyond?

Between October 2022 and July 2023, I conducted interviews with forty five union staff, labor educators, union activists and others engaged in worker education on the climate crisis (for example, in worker focused organizations like Platform and the UK Hazards Campaign). This included speaking with union leads on education and/or environment at six of the ten largest unions in the UK, as well as the TUC and GFTU, which are both umbrella organizations of unions; but it also included labor educators running workshops on climate and environment issues, as well as rank and file union activists engaged in climate activism. I identified participants through trade union websites, media and social media reporting on labor climate organizing, and snowball sampling. I spoke with individuals across England, and in Wales and Scotland. Here, post-Covid era familiarity of most trade unionists with speaking over Zoom made doing a national study relatively easy; indeed, many unionists in London, where I am based, also chose to speak over Zoom for reasons of convenience. Though the focus of this article is on culture workers, the individuals I spoke with for this research were engaged in all sectors of the UK economy, including transport, health, education, local government, communications, retail, manufacturing and energy. Quotations in this article are drawn from this set of research interviews, unless otherwise specified. In addition to conducting interviews, I also collected curriculum materials and documents produced by unions and other groups about

workers, trade unions and the climate crisis; I observed labor and climate focused conferences, workshops and demonstrations: and I collected and reviewed previous research on labor and the climate crisis in the UK and globally.

When I began this study, I realize now that I still had in my mind a classroom based conception of labor education, even though I knew well that labor education, like social movement learning more generally, was dependent on learning in informal as well as formal (or nonformal) settings. I anticipated spending much of my time sitting in on labor courses on the climate for union activists. However, as I continued my research and reflected more on the labor education literature, I increasingly recognized that what was critical was not to look just at what was going on in classroom settings, but also at how classes, seminars and workshops on climate crisis linked up with other actors and spaces across the movement. Well developed curriculum and pedagogy on the climate crisis that are widely accessible for workers is an important goal to fight for; but if these aren't closely connected to broader trade union, labor and environment movement struggles, their effectiveness and value *as labor education* will be limited. It is this story of embeddedness of labor and climate learning and action that the rest of the article seeks to tell.

Worker focus of environmental action groups

Starting in 2004 and growing rapidly from 2010 onwards, a coalition of arts based environmental action groups in the UK, including Art Not Oil, BP or Not BP, Culture Unstained, Liberate Tate, Platform and Shell Out Sounds, have conducted a continuing campaign to end fossil fuel sponsorship in the country's cultural institutions. The argument of this coalition is that 'oil companies cultivate arts and culture sponsorship relationships to help create a 'social license to operate,' and 'this contributes to the veneer of legitimacy that enables them to keep expanding operations at a time of climate crisis' (Art Not Oil 2021). These groups have engaged in a range of creative and sometimes disruptive actions in UK theaters, museums and galleries to draw attention to the presence of fossil fuel sponsorship, 'provoke a wider public conversation about the destructive activities of the fossil fuel industry,' and promote a culture shift in which fossil fuel companies are stigmatized and the necessity of a fossil free future is embraced (BP or Not BP 2023). This campaign has been successful in attracting media and public attention, and helping to end fossil fuel funding at several UK cultural institutions, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, National Theatre, Royal Opera House, National Gallery, Tate and Southbank Centre (Art Not Oil 2022).

These action groups are notable for being highly worker focused, in two regards. First, many of the members of these groups are themselves culture workers, and engage in their activism as part of a struggle to 'reclaim' or 'liberate' the cultural spaces in which they work from corporate control, and contest the broader values and social purposes that the UK culture sector promotes. 'I've been working in the cultural sector for five years,' says a Tate gallery worker and BP or Not BP activist: 'I knew that I loved working in museums, but the inside influence I had was very limited' (Preece 2022). A National Theatre worker, who also collaborates with BP or Not BP, likewise explains her activism as driven by a desire for workers in the arts 'to have more agency over their workplace' and push for a 'cultural shift' in the sector (Hearst 2019). Second, many of these groups are also focused on the importance of engaging with frontline workers in the museums and galleries that have fossil fuel sponsorship. Our activism 'can make it possible for employees to have the internal conversations they want to have, but feel under a lot of pressure not to have,' writes one of the co-founders of BP or Not BP: 'We work with people inside the sector to ensure that our framing of campaigns is helpful and not counter-productive' (Worth 2021, 24). Groups like Platform insist on the importance of focusing on class and engaging with trade unions as being centrally important to the success of the climate movement,

and criticize the broader UK environmental movement, which, as one Platform organizer puts it, still ‘tends to be middle class or aristocratic or ruling class.’

The worker outreach of these groups, which constitutes a form of labor education, has taken on a range of forms. Activists have written and distributed letters to museum and gallery workers informing them of their actions, explaining the reasons for their actions, and inviting workers to ‘talk to us today, and in the future’ (BP or Not BP 2022). At a protest performance at the British Museum in 2022, BP or Not BP included ‘a small labour-organiser section ... dedicated to having conversations with museum staff about how they can support the protest through their union’ (rs2121 2022). Activists have also provided solidarity with workers’ struggles against gallery and museum management over wage demands, layoffs and privatization – most notably during the extended period of strike action at the National Gallery in 2015 – showing up on picket lines when workers are on strike to give speeches, hold banners and offer material support, while also talking in support of worker concerns in their own gallery and museum climate actions (BP or Not BP 2015). This practice has been essential in linking climate and labor struggles together, and building personal relationships between trade union and climate activists and museum and gallery workers. During the strikes at the British Museum and British Library in 2023, a PCS union rep explains the value of picket line solidarity from climate activists with BP or Not BP and Culture Unstained. ‘When you’re dealing with groups of workers that have never been on a picket before ... it’s quite a jump to take industrial action,’ the rep says, so ‘it’s useful to have these groups come along and support the pickets and let the workers see, “Oh, it’s not just us here, there’s something bigger going on.”’

The anti-fracking movement in the UK

While the pro-worker orientation and outreach of environmental action groups working on fossil fuel divestment in the UK’s culture sector was important, it likely wouldn’t have had the form or impact it did without the presence of several other factors. One was the rise of the anti-fracking movement during this period. Fracking had been heavily promoted by the Coalition and Conservative governments between 2012 and 2019 (when a moratorium on fracking was imposed), and immediately became a focus of intense conflict, leading to mass protests and direct action resistance around the country. ‘By 2018,’ notes Muncie (2020, 465), ‘there were over 300 anti-fracking groups established in the UK.’ This had a significant impact on the UK trade union movement: while some unions (such as GMB) supported the fracking industry, others were drawn directly into anti-fracking mobilization. Trade unionists were visibly present in anti-fracking actions (e.g. KCCC 2018; White 2017); and when three anti-fracking protesters were jailed for their activism in 2018, almost two hundred trade unionists, including national leaders from five different unions, signed a public letter of support (Cortes, et al. 2018). The Bakers’ Union (BFAWU), a small union that is very involved in climate and environment issues, points to the anti-fracking movement as a key starting point (Hodson 2019). Unite produced a ‘booklet on how to campaign against fracking’ (Price 2020, 279). Unions including BFAWU, NEU, UCU, FBU, Unite and Unison all passed motions in opposition to fracking (Hookes 2017a).

PCS was also highly engaged in the anti-fracking movement. National union leaders spoke out against fracking, and the union passed an anti-fracking motion and produced a campaign pamphlet, *There is an Alternative to Fracking: Building a Climate Jobs Plan for Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre* (Lloveras 2021; Price 2020). More directly, one of the key relationships between the arts based environmental groups and PCS that was formed early in the fossil fuel sponsorship campaign and helped to shape its development, began not in London, where much of the campaign was focused, but in the anti-fracking movement in the north of the country. As a PCS museum worker and union rep recalls:

I met the campaigners at an anti-fracking camp. They had a workshop there about oil sponsorship in museums and galleries. I was vaguely aware of it, but it wasn't something I really knew about, because they were mainly in London museums, not in my museum in Liverpool.... I approached the guy at the end and said, 'Hey, you come into our workplaces, but you don't talk to the workers, what's going on?' And that was the start of the collaboration that still exists today.

From this point on, PCS involvement with the sponsorship campaign steadily grew, starting by informally collaborating, providing guidance on ways to engage museum and gallery workers with the campaign, and educating climate campaigners about union and worker issues in the sector; and then leading to PCS formally passing a motion opposing fossil fuel sponsorship and officially joining the Art Not Oil coalition. The successful motion to oppose oil sponsorship was proposed not by any of the PCS museum and gallery branches in London, but by the National Museums Liverpool branch, located near the center of anti-fracking campaigning in the north of England (BP or Not BP 2015). 'This is how we're going to win,' BP or Not BP (2015) stated after the PCS motion was passed: 'By uniting our struggles and finding ways to work together.'

Why has the anti-fracking movement been so important in (re)shaping worker and trade union education and action on the climate crisis? In the first instance, fracking makes the harms of fossil fuel extraction immediate and visceral, as it dramatically expands what Klein (2016) refers to as the fossil fuel 'sacrifice zone,' and 'threaten[s] some of the most picturesque parts of Britain ... swallowing up all kinds of places that imagined themselves safe.' Trade unionists, alongside others, joined the anti-fracking movement out of concern for their homes, communities and local environment. Fracking also shifted the frame of worker climate education and action in the UK. There had been an earlier wave of greening the workplace initiatives among trade unions during the New Labour government; but much of this was localized in individual workplaces, apolitical and technocratic, and dependent on support from employers and the state for success (Farnhill 2018; Zbyszewska 2021). Anti-fracking, by contrast, was structural and national in scope, highly politicized, and brought unionists into direct conflict with the fracking industry and the state. Finally, mass mobilizations in anti-fracking camps and protests in the UK, like similar mobilizations against oil pipelines in North America and coal mines in Germany, create what Eagle Shield, et al. (2020, 2) call 'educational spaces,' that can help to build relationships between groups from different sectors, and 'educate people who come together with different kinds of knowledge about climate change,' through informal conversations, campaign speeches, and formal workshops and trainings (Price 2020, 270).

Trade unions as schools of democratic practice

'The climate crisis is such a huge existential threat it can be overwhelming,' says a gallery worker and PCS rep, so the 'ritual of writing a [union] motion, getting it circulated, getting people to support it, ... gives you something to organize around.' 'At their best,' write McAlevy and Lawlor (2023, 216), 'unions can and should be both schools for and actors in democracy,' in which members learn how to raise their voices and act on their interests in the union, workplace and wider society. Once rank and file activists start to mobilize around an issue such as climate crisis, the union provides them with a set of democratic structures and practices to try to move action on the issue forward. As another PCS rep argues, a central part of labor education and action on the climate crisis is learning 'how you can engage with the democracy of your union': learning, for example, not just how to write motions, but to develop motions that have a good chance of being passed and acted on once passed, given the wider politics of the union. Unions such as PCS offer formal training on 'how to do the nuts and bolts trade union stuff'; but activists also learn these practices informally, in conversations with more experienced activists, and discussion groups set up by rank and file action caucuses.

Some activists warn that ‘people can get lost in the bureaucracy’ of unions, wasting energy passing motions that don’t have any ‘follow through,’ and argue that if activists ‘want to spend our time doing something, we don’t need to ask anyone [in the union] for permission.’ But PCS reps say that motions are an important part of their climate activism at work. ‘Introducing a motion can be educative,’ a PCS rep argues, because ‘you can use your motion to have a conversation and debate at your [union] events and conference, and invite an external speaker to give information’ about the issue. Proposing, circulating and debating motions within the union, adds another rep, is a way of ‘escalating up’ an issue, sharing it more widely, beyond ‘informal conversations between people who know each other.’ Successful motions allow activists to access union resources to support their campaigns, such as ‘money for creating banners, creating leaflets, creating a toolkit.’ They give the right to speak publicly and officially on an issue in the name of the union. They also help to direct union practice, as motions passed at the union’s annual conference ‘set the work for [union staff] for the year.’ Over the last decade, PCS rank and file unionists have passed dozens of motions on the climate crisis, committing their union to oppose fracking and oil sponsorship of museums and galleries; divest pension funds from fossil fuels; promote renewable energy, climate jobs, and free and green public transportation; create a network of green union reps, provide green rep training, and lobby government for statutory recognition of green reps; integrate climate issues into collective bargaining; and work in direct partnership with environmental and climate action groups (Hookes 2017a, 2017b).

Unions provide other vital spaces for democratic learning and action as well. PCS is organized not just into site specific branches but sector groups, of which the Culture Group is an example. These groups provide a space for activists to come together from different employers in a common sector and learn from one another. ‘It’s a really good space where we can meet up and exchange best practice,’ says a union activist and museum worker: ‘To make sure that one museum is not doing something good and the rest of us are suffering.’ It also offers a vehicle for developing a powerful and collective voice for taking action against employers. A rep explains that it can be difficult for workers at a single museum to directly challenge their employer on fossil fuel sponsorship, or partner with outside climate action groups; but ‘we use the group structure as a filter’ to speak and act as a sector wide worker collective.

Finally, unions offer workers a structure for engaging collectively and directly with employers over issues like the climate crisis through joint negotiating committees – something that is not accessible to climate action groups. Trade union negotiations, as McAlevey and Lawlor (2023, 12, 71) argue, ‘can serve as a dynamic classroom for workers’ political education,’ where they ‘learn how to take effective actions, ... to take control, strategize, test, revise, and execute a winning collective action campaign.’ As PCS activists started to focus on climate issues, they used negotiations committees and other forums to ask for changes from museum and gallery employers. At the Tate, for example, PCS got the employer to agree ‘to run green forums, promote the role of ‘green reps’ in the workplace, commit to becoming carbon neutral by 2030 and ... to “refuse to access fossil fuel sponsorship”’ (Redmond 2019). This is an employer, whose director had rejected calls in 2011 to cut ties with BP, saying ‘the board has thought very carefully about this and decided it was the right thing to do to continue with BP, who have been great supporters of the arts’ (Brown 2011). During the mass student climate strike in September 2019, the union secured management permission at the Southbank Centre for workers to join the strike, through requesting leave or making up for missed work the following week.

National union education & organizing programs

As a national union, PCS is recognized in the UK for having some of the strongest programs and policies on climate and the environment (Hookes 2017a). It runs training workshops on

'Green Reps and Climate Justice,' it has developed a national network of green union reps who meet together in a Green Forum, it has a designated national staff person for climate and environment as well as an Assistant General Secretary who is a champion on climate and environment issues, it participates regularly in seminars and conferences on the climate crisis, partners with a range of climate action groups, and lobbies the government to take stronger climate action. Much of this work has been developed in response to conference motions on climate that have been passed by rank and file activists over the years. 'Unions tend to work in echo chambers,' says a labor educator with Unite, 'and the echo chambers in a trade union are the activists.' Once rank and file activists start to raise concerns about the climate crisis 'in all the ways in which they interact with the union, ... the union starts to do something about that.'

Union staff also point to the importance of their participation in the wider labor movement for shaping their own learning about the climate crisis. 'A big influence has been what the South African trade unions were doing,' says a PCS staffer, as they developed the 'concept of a just and transformative transition' that has now been picked up by PCS as well. Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), a global network of unions, has also been helpful in creating a 'trade union space where we get to have real debate' about the energy transition, and producing 'significant pieces of research' that enable PCS to develop deeper understandings of the energy sector and 'have different conversations' in arguments with the state and other trade unions over energy transition policy. International union networks and organizations often perform such a 'framing and coordinating function,' as they focus on 'the production and dissemination of knowledge through reports, conferences and training'; and as such, constitute 'potential sites through which a political vision on climate change at a global level can be developed' (Felli 2014, 373; Thomas 2021, 2).

In developing training programs, discussion forums and union publications on the climate crisis, PCS staff seek to 'distill' this wider labor movement learning 'down to our members and activists to start understanding a bit better some of these big framing issues.' They seek to frame their education programs to appeal to members and activists 'who are just concerned about recycling and what to do with this crisp packet,' as well as those 'who want world revolution' – because 'anybody who wants to get involved [with the union's climate agenda], you just want to grab' and make sure everyone 'feels engaged and not ignored.' PCS staff also seek to ensure that their education workshops are integrated within broader organizing agendas in the union. 'One of the things we've tried to emphasize more over the past few years,' a staff member says, 'is that it's not just about doing the training,' but learning how to fit this work into 'the structures of the union, ... the branch and the groups.' Both staff and activists at PCS acknowledge that making these links between education and follow up action is not always easy in practice.

A key question is the broader impact of this formal program of labor education on the climate crisis for PCS. Labor education workshops on climate can be highly impactful. One labor educator with Unison, for example, took a TUC Climate Literacy course, at the end of which participants were asked to make personal and collective pledges for follow up actions: the educator committed to giving up flying and eating meat, and to developing climate and just transition courses for rank and file activists, which have since become a major part of his work for the union. In the case of the PCS Culture Group, it is not clear that formal climate workshops had a central, triggering role in their climate activism. But this is not to say that activists don't see the union's climate education program as useful. They speak of the content of the program as being helpful for learning about the climate crisis. They speak, in particular, of the value of being able to build relationships and share ideas with activists from across the union, who they engage with in education workshops. 'It's really interesting to meet other PCS members, who are often in very different jobs than culture,' a union rep says, and it provides an opportunity to learn strategies 'that I hadn't thought of, so in the civil service, a lot of them are talking

about shaping government procurement' and supply chains. These are ideas that can be brought back to local discussions of developing climate activism in the culture sector. Activists also say that the highly visible climate education and action program in PCS plays a signalling role that climate is an important issue, and 'there is fertile ground for the [Culture] Group to expand on [climate activism] and be listened to by the national union.'

Learning worker interests & workplace actions

Two of the key challenges for developing effective labor education and action on the climate crisis are clearly linking worker interests to the climate crisis and identifying targets and actions that workers can focus on to address the crisis effectively. Climate is 'not something our members see as an immediate [concern];' a UCU union negotiator reflects, since 'their immediate struggle is around the cost of living crisis, [and] climate isn't up there as a major issue for most people' (Quick and Crawford 2022). Likewise, a TUC educator argues that while the labor movement can put on climate change courses, 'I think we're struggling to frame what it is we want green reps to do, ... you say "just transition," [but] what do you want [the reps] to do?' In this, the climate education and action of unionized culture workers in PCS represent one possible guiding model.

Worker interests, like class consciousness more generally, 'are not given, but are social constructs shaped by a wide range of factors,' and can be learned, unlearned and relearned through a process of political education (Thomas and Pugliano 2021, 529). In the fossil fuel sponsorship campaign, environmental action groups and union activists worked to link climate concern with oil sponsorship, with museum and gallery worker concern with public sector funding cuts, privatisation, outsourcing, layoffs and wage stagnation, through repeatedly using a 'two sides of the same coin' rhetorical frame. 'Privatisation and oil sponsorship are two sides of the same coin – the commercialisation of art and culture,' state BP or Not BP (2016). 'Privatisation and sponsorship by oil companies are two sides of the same coin,' echoes the PCS Culture Group: 'It is about the on-going sell-off of public services' (Meaker 2014). An organizer with Platform explains the political analysis behind the rhetoric:

Neoliberalism had an impact on these cultural institutions that had been set up before the Second World War.... First of all, they brought in capital, ... from the corporate sector, and allowed themselves to be utilized as advertising hoarding for capital. At the same time, they embedded neoliberal structures of ... the relationship between labor and capital in those institutions, i.e., precarious work, laying people off, etc.... In theory, these are slightly separate dynamics.... But actually, what happened was these two things at the same time, ... and that allowed for a collaboration which might not have otherwise existed.

It was not inevitable for culture workers to see their interests in this way: as one museum worker notes, management argues that oil sponsorship is in workers' best interest, as it (supposedly) increases the funding available to pay their wages. But the two sides of a coin framing was reinforced through concerted activist practice, such that it was normalized that at strikes, climate campaigners would show up, and at climate actions, worker concerns would be discussed.

In August 2022, the PCS Culture Group conducted a member survey of their views on fossil fuel sponsorship. There had been a changeover of leadership in the Group, a PCS rep explains, and we wanted 'to make sure that people were still supportive of us going forward with that agenda' and it wasn't just a pet project of a small handful of activists. Over 85% of members responding opposed fossil fuel sponsorship, while 75% of members called on PCS to 'do more campaigning to end fossil fuel sponsorship of UK cultural institutions' (PCS Culture Group 2022a). More generally, unionized culture workers in the UK have increasingly come to see themselves as lead actors for worker climate action. 'Art and culture workers have a vital role to play in the radical changes needed to avert climate disaster,' the PCS Culture Group told

the press in 2019: 'The cultural organisations they staff are in a unique position to engage citizens in the urgency, values and opportunities of a transition away from fossil fuels' (Redmond 2019).

The fossil fuel sponsorship campaign was also effective in mobilizing interest because it provided a clear target that was close to home, that workers and climate activists could take action against. It was perhaps more of a symbolic target, focusing on the 'social license' of the fossil fuel industry, rather than the industry's operations per se. But as one theater worker writes, 'as arts workers we understand the power of stories [and symbols] to disrupt norms, to inspire hope' (Hearst 2019). It was also a campaign that framed climate action as political, structural and conflictual, and enabled workers and climate activists to push beyond prevalent climate discourses that focus on individual responsibility for reducing one's own carbon footprint. Once culture workers came to see climate action as being a core part of their worker identity and interest, further climate targets and actions opened up, beyond the issue of fossil fuel sponsorship: fossil fuel pension divestment, carbon neutral workplaces, facility time for green rep union work, support for workers to participate in civil disobedience as part of a broader climate movement, and so on.

In the summer of 2022, London was hit by an unprecedented heatwave, and culture workers in the capital, like everyone else, were deeply impacted. As a PCS union rep and British Museum worker recalls:

That's what really drove it home for all of our members. I was like, 'This is climate change, it's affecting us at work.' I think that's really changed a lot of the mindset of our colleagues at work.... That sense of urgency is there now, because we're thinking, 'We can't survive like this every summer.'

For culture workers, the loop had come full circle: their campaign against oil sponsorship was now linked not just to a broader fight against privatization of public services, but to the direct effect climate change was having in their own workplaces. As temperatures soared, union activists negotiated with museum and gallery employers for a series of rapid climate change adaptations. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, for example, the local union branch secured 'the distribution of fans and cold water for front-of-house staff, the relaxation of uniform guidelines, and the closure of galleries that reach 30C or above' (Smythe 2022). At the national level, rank and file activists started to work with union staff on developing a 'model collective agreement on working in a warmer world,' a toolkit that could help guide branches in bargaining for climate adaptations in negotiations with employers across the country.

Conclusion: lessons learned

Unionized culture workers in the UK, alongside their climate activist partners, have engaged in sustained climate education and action over an extended period of time. Not only have workers made the link between climate concerns and their union's fight against privatization, many now embrace climate action as a core part of their identity, interest and activism as culture workers. They represent one of the few examples in the country of unionized workers directly challenging the power of the fossil fuel industry in their own sector. Alongside other sector groups in PCS, they have helped to push their union to take a leading role in the UK trade union movement on climate change. Culture workers have also had success in their core campaign to oppose fossil fuel sponsorship. 'My abiding memory,' says an organizer with Platform, is of a Shell executive telling him in the mid-1990s that 'you will never ever succeed in breaking the relationship between the oil industry and sponsorship in the arts, don't even try, you're a mosquito on the back of an elephant, and it won't work.' The campaign has come a long way since then.

In all of this, there are lessons for building a broader labor climate movement and fighting for a just transition. Labor education on the climate crisis matters: but it needs to be understood

as an embedded form of education, encompassing informal learning as well as formal classrooms and curriculum, and closely connected to broader movement and struggle. Climate activists need to develop a strong worker focus, but are a complement to, not a substitute for, organized labor. Union staff have a key role to play in providing resources, support and guidance; but effective labor education and action on climate needs to be bottom up, driven by rank and file activists. Conversely, rank and file activists, to achieve wider impact, need to learn and engage with the democratic structures and practices of their union. Mass mobilization on the climate crisis can be vital in creating educational spaces for broader movement building. Workers need to see a direct link between the climate crisis and their own interests, and learn forms of climate action that are close to home, practical and effective. If trade unions are to play a key role in the climate movement, as some now hope, and if the climate movement seeks to engage workers more widely in its fight against climate crisis, it is likely that the model of labor education and action on climate that is found in the recent history of unionized culture workers in the UK may offer a useful way forward.

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