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Beyond the nature–labour divide: trade union responses to climate change in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

We present the life histories of two environmentally engaged unionists in South Africa, who were decisive for formulating the environmental programmes of their respective trade unions. Their experiences of participating in the resistance against apartheid in universities and factories taught them the necessity to connect different struggles and equipped them with the knowledge and ability to connect the fight for workers’ rights with the fight against environmental degradation. Both activists experienced the difficulty of integrating ‘the environment’ politically and practically into a trade union agenda. The labour movement has traditionally experienced nature as a place outside of work to be enjoyed for recreation. While nature constitutes an indispensable condition for labour, it has been privately appropriated by Capital. For environmental policies to form an integral part of union agendas, nature needs to be wrestled away from its appropriation by Capital and understood as an inseparable ally of labour.

KEYWORDS

Labour environmentalism; South Africa; life histories; National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa; just transition; ecological crisis

Introduction

In a recent paper, Death stated that at present there ‘is no clearly identifiable, relatively unified and broadly popular environmental movement in South Africa’ (2014, p. 1216). This raises a puzzle because the country is in a state of ecological collapse. Nevertheless, our paper argues that there are emerging initiatives in the labour movement to address the ecological crisis. There are many local self-organized groups taking up local environmental issues – often in opposition to extractive mining and its impact on land access and water quality in particular (Cock, Lambert, & Fitzgerald, 2013). In this paper, we will concentrate on trade union activities, using the example of two environmentally engaged unionists – operating within solidaristic rather than individualistic frameworks – it shows varieties of routes from union engagement to environmental engagement. In spite of setbacks, we believe that labour initiatives have a considerable potential for both creating an environmental movement in South Africa and reviving a fragmented labour movement (Cock, 2007).

Workers are affected by climate change and will be increasingly affected in their positions as citizens, as workers involved in production and by government measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change: their workplaces are at risk either way. Therefore, the views of trade unions on increasing environmental destruction as well as the measures taken to protect the environment...
and themselves from environmentally damaging actions are central to the way in which workers’ rights will be defended in combatting climate change. While COP15 in Copenhagen received a great deal of international hype, its outcome was frustration with world leaders’ inability to take effective action on carbon emissions. In contrast, the arrival of COP17 in Durban, South Africa (2011) provided a stimulus for action. It was a notable feature of COP17 that South African unions and environmental groups were present in force, determined not to let another opportunity slip by, not least because it is the Global South which will be the first to be impacted by climate change. Unions decided they needed to know what was being negotiated in their country and what kind of position they should adopt towards it. Both National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) have sought to develop progressive climate change policies based on a critique that argues that the climate crisis is a direct consequence of capitalist exploitation and consumption. These initiatives are challenging the binary rhetoric of ‘jobs’ versus ‘the environment’ (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2011) and aim to overcome a historical antagonism between environmental and labour movements.

The demise of the old and the process of constructing a new South African labour movement

Once a model of a strong labour federation with 22 affiliate members and one of the most respected labour confederations in the world, the COSATU is now in a crisis (Craven, 2016; Satgar & Southall, 2015), partly due to the restructuring of the economy which is linked to a high rate of unemployment (almost 40%), massive job losses and increasing outsourcing and casualization. This means that millions of workers are outside of trade union structures. Moreover, wages are low, averaging R3300 a month (about $250 as at 08/17), and increasing poverty affects an estimated 65% of the population (Zwelinzima, 2014). The loss of jobs leads to a loss of union members and to a dissatisfaction of the remaining members with the abilities of the union to fight for their rights.

In addition, there is an increasing dissatisfaction with the ANC government and its neo-liberal economic policies. NUMSA, a former affiliate of COSATU, has asserted the need for independence from the government and called for the working class to develop an independent worker’s party to advance to socialism. It has founded a civil society organization, the United Front, to do so. These tensions have led to the expulsion of NUMSA from COSATU. In April 2017, three former COSATU affiliates including NUMSA, together with 50 other trade unions and growing, have created a new federation, The South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU, http://saftu.org.za). Number five of their six main demands reads: ‘Adoption of “Million Climate Jobs” strategies to generate employment for a genuinely green “Just Transition”’ (SAFTU, 2017).

The ecological crisis

Simultaneously with the changing political landscape, the climate crisis is deepening with devastating impacts on the working class in the form of rising food and energy prices, crop failures, water shortages, and dislocation. Many South Africans are exposed to what Nixon (2013) has called ‘the slow violence’ of toxic pollution in a process which is damaging, insidious, and largely invisible. Mostly Black South Africans continue to live on the most damaged land in the most polluted neighbourhoods often adjoining working or abandoned mines, the coal-fired power stations, steel mills, incinerators, and waste sites or polluting industries, without access to clean air and water, electricity, sanitation, and refuse removal. In the province of Gauteng (in which Johannesburg is situated), there
are 1.6 million African people living on mine dumps that are contaminated with uranium and toxic heavy metals, including arsenic, aluminium, manganese, and mercury.

South Africa’s commitments to reducing polluting carbon emissions are vague and insubstantial. At present over 500 tonnes of carbon a year are emitted, two new coal-fired power stations (among the largest in the world) are being built and 40 new coal mines are planned, most of them in Mpumalanga on the most fertile land in the country (Baker, Burton, Godinho, & Trollip, 2015). The country is moving towards ecological catastrophe because the government remains wedded to the dominant interests of capital organized in the mineral–energy complex (Fine & Rustomjee, 1996).

**Confronting the ecological crisis: new alliances, forms of power and organizations**

The ecological crisis, however, is driving new initiatives which are building popular power, developing new strategies and forms of communal solidarity including formal and informal alliances, and the use of symbolic power which has a tendency to dramatize both the causes and the consequences of the ecological crisis. They are organising around issues in the everyday experience of working people, especially rising food and energy prices. As Harvey has suggested this ‘politics of everyday life is the crucible where revolutionary energies might develop’ (2014).

There is also a growing emphasis on moving beyond denunciation to formulating alternative narratives of, for example, food sovereignty (South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, SAFSC, http://www.safsc.org.za), energy democracy (Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org), transformative feminism (Cock, 2016), and environmental justice (Earthlife Africa, http://earthlife.org.za). These could be building blocks for an alternative social order; a local organization is able not only to mobilize opposition to fracking but also to explore ‘… alternatives which will foster energy democracy and transformative development while protecting the natural resources and people of the Karoo’ (Black Thursday Southern Cape Land campaign statement 13 July 2015, unpublished). Other organizations are promoting post-carbon alternatives such as Earthlife’s Sustainable Energy and Livelihoods Project (see Cock, 2007) which combines water harvesting, food sovereignty, and clean energy, through installing, maintaining, and training women on the use of biogas digesters and PVC solar power units. These initiatives are generating demands which cannot easily be accommodated by and thus challenge neo-liberal capitalism. Some of these new alliances are between formerly antagonistic groupings, such as those concerned exclusively with the conservation of threatened plants, animals, and wilderness areas and those concerned with social needs. An example is the struggle against the proposed open cast FuleniCoal mine close to the border of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, one of Africa’s oldest game reserves where local women have mobilized with the support of conservation organizations to form the iMfolozi Community and Wilderness Alliance. They are confronting powerful forces: interests in the coal mine include Glencore and MHM Billiton, the world’s largest commodity trader and mining house, respectively (Bond, 2017). Such alliances between conservationists and social movements are beginning to close a historic gap.

Many trade unionists now recognize the links between the climate crisis and neo-liberal capitalism. This found organizational expression in two COSATU committees established in 2010 comprising representatives from some COSATU affiliates and from environmental organizations. Only for a short time have these structures survived the turmoil in COSATU and led to shared research into coal mining, chemicals, and poultry farming with the National Union of Mineworkers, the Chemical Workers Union, and the Food and Allied Workers Union. The Central Executive Committee of COSATU adopted a Climate Change Policy Framework which stated its commitment to a ‘just
transition’ (ITUC, 2016) and stressed that Capitalist accumulation has been the underlying cause of excessive greenhouse gas emissions, and therefore global warming and climate change. While the framework has not been abolished, it did not feed into any specific union policies.

Within COSATU two broad approaches to the notion of a ‘just transition’ exist. The first sits within the framework of ecological modernization and emphasizes reformist change with green jobs, social protection, retraining and consultation and a preoccupation to protect the interests of the most vulnerable workers. Writers such as Foster (2002), however, argue that such an approach does little to challenge the capitalist economic mode of production. An alternative position views the climate crisis as a catalysing force for transformative change towards socialism. Now expelled from COSATU, NUMSA supported this latter vision for a time. It argued for a socially owned renewable energy sector subject to democratic control, where the rights of workers are respected. Social ownership means energy being claimed as a common good that can take a mix of different forms such as public utilities, cooperatives, or municipal-owned entities. While this programme is still available on the NUMSA website (http://www.numsa.org.za/article/numsa-2015-may-day-speaker-notes/), the political turmoil of the past years has pushed it off the agenda of urgent demands.

Before these crises and the efforts involved in constructing not only a new trade union confederation but also a new political party (United Front, https://unitedfrontsa.wordpress.com) NUMSA strongly promoted the notion of energy democracy, as a building block towards socialism (http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/numsa-and-allies-call-for-dismantling-the-mineral-energy-complex/). It was recognized that an understanding of a ‘just transition’ limited to the goal of a ‘low-carbon economy’ could contain the embryo of a very different socio-economic order. But it could also mean the expansion of the present privatized renewable energy programme in which electricity becomes unaffordable for the majority of South Africans. As a NUMSA official pointed out, ‘Renewable energy at the service of capital accumulation could result in even harsher patterns of displacement and appropriation of land than those brought about by other forms of energy’ (Abramsky, 2012, p. 349).

**Our question: individual life trajectories and organizational transformation**

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger project to understand the ways in which societal, organizational, and individual histories are intertwined and the roles which individuals play in changing organizations. One of our points of departure is Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘moments of danger’, which in contrast to the notion of crisis denotes not only the threat of disintegration but also the threat of ‘conformism’ (Benjamin, 2009). He speaks of the need to ‘wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it’ (Benjamin, 2009, 3). Only if organizations are transformed to meet the demands of new times, can their traditions be rescued.

Another point of departure results from our previous project on the environmental policies of trade unions in which we found how important the practices and presence of specific individuals had been for change to happen. While collective actions are decisive for organizations like unions, they also depend on the work, passion, and competencies of individuals, developed within social relations. As Hall (1988) argued, ‘The conventional culture of the Left, with its stress on “objective contradictions”, “impersonal structures” and processes that work “behind men’s (sic) backs”, has disabled us from confronting the subjective in politics in any very coherent way’ (p. 25). Simultaneously, we can find the opposite, the discourse on change agents and leaders, which assumes that individuals can make history and change organizations on their own.
Unions are a useful case study to pursue our question, because they have to simultaneously reassure their traditional membership, recruit new members, cooperate with other social movements, act on a global level but remain rooted to the local, and accommodate new issues like climate change and the North–South divide. Unions are living what Benjamin called ‘moments of danger’. While unions have cared for the environment in the past (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013), the task today is a transformation of unions to overcome the work–nature divide that has characterized their history. Thus, we have chosen individuals who have been decisive in bringing the environment, specifically climate change, onto the trade union agenda. Our project was undertaken by 10 researchers in Brazil, India, South Africa, Sweden, Spain, and the UK.1 We conducted 121 interviews (over 300 hours of transcript) between 2012 and 2014 with unionists and members of environmental movements, who worked with unions. We are currently analysing the results of the project by selecting examples which highlight specific time–space conjunctures and interrelations between individual trajectories and organizational histories. This allows us to develop an understanding of the relationship between individual engagement and organizational change.2

In South Africa, we conducted 25 life-history interviews with trade unionists and environmentalists, of whom seven were women. For this paper, we have chosen the example of two unionists, who were key to putting environmental issues onto the agenda of their respective trade unions, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) and NUMSA. Our aim is to understand how the ways in which individuals develop their knowledge and capabilities at specific time–space junctures, and within specific collectivities, enable them to play a significant role in the transformation of organizations. We analyse how capabilities and worldviews developed over a lifetime within specific socio-political conditions shape the ways in which individuals contribute to the transformation of organizations. Life-history interviews (Portelli, 1997) are apposite as they allow us to understand whether and under what circumstances labour and environmental concerns become part of peoples’ life stories. The interviews were introduced by an explanation of the project followed by the question to tell us their life history starting with their place and date of birth.

**The power of place and the difficulties of driving a new agenda for labour**

The societal positions of our two protagonists in terms of race, class, and gender, and thus their early life trajectories have been different, although both studied Industrial Sociology, were exposed to the Marxist tradition of radical critique, and can be described as organic intellectuals in Gramsci’s sense. They used their knowledge and experience developed during the anti-apartheid struggle for their work in the trade union movement. Both came late to environmental issues, one having to prepare a Union position for the COP17 in Durban 2011, and the other preparing the union for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002. This shows that international events can be essential to alert local organizations to global issues they need to tackle. Their task is then to connect global issues to local labour struggles. Since our question is the relationship between life histories and organizational change, we only address the way in which our protagonists contributed to the formulation of environmental politics in their unions. We cannot follow the fate of these policies in the respective unions, nor can we know how they might fare given the recent split within the union movement and the foundation of the United Front.


**Jane Barrett: entering the trade union movement**

Jane, coming from a white, liberal middle-class family, was a student activist. She was elected as National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) General Secretary, and then returned to university to study industrial sociology. This is the moment in her story where Jane first talks about the way in which different struggles come together:

(... But then at the same time this explosion of resistance and repression off the campuses, and of course there was an intersection of the two. Because there were protest actions and police were coming onto campuses, and there were clashes that were happening. (...) And there were sort of tentative links being forged between the students – between SASO and NUSAS. (...) SASO was banned as one of the 18 in ’77. So those sort of parallel things that were happening, for me, were a big catalyst for, I guess, where I went from there.

The decisive word here is ‘intersection’. NUSAS was the largest student’s union, almost exclusively white, although it was a radical anti-apartheid organization. SASO (South African Student Organisation) had been founded in 1968 as a critique against the predominantly white NUSAS, which was not seen to represent the interests of black students. SASO was led by Steve Biko, who was later murdered in police custody while being interrogated. It was a further trigger in Jane’s political awakening. The ‘tentative links’ forged between those two organizations in Durban during Jane’s time in NUSAS were significant because they connected different struggles. The theme of intersections, of struggles coming together, is a thread that we can follow throughout Jane’s story. The NUSAS strategy to transform tertiary education (today it would be called decolonising) in the context of a wider struggle against apartheid turns out to be about connecting:

And it was at the time, moving into 1977, NUSAS adopted a campaign under the name of Education for an African Future. (...) it was a protest campaign, but it was also about changing the curriculum of the universities. And it was a really effective campaign because it didn’t just look at the sort of traditional arts. (...) the (...) Left in the student movement generally tended to attract more of the social science and arts students, but this was an attempt to cross the divide and reach out to medical students and engineering students and so forth.

In her role as General Secretary of NUSAS connecting and mending divides is at the centre of Jane’s activities: the divides between students of social sciences and natural and technological sciences, the divides between students inside and communities outside the campus, the divides between white and black students. There is another divide, which becomes formative for Jane, the divide between the students’ and the workers’ unions. Summing up her activities during her student days and as the General Secretary of NUSAS she explains:

But I think the next two years in NUSAS exposed me much more to a class analysis, and I became increasingly convinced that Labour was where it was at! Interviewer: How did that exposure happen? Anything specific that you can talk about? Well, in the Education for an African Future campaign there were a number of key academics that we relied on to kind of input into the process of the campaign for curriculum change. (...) but I guess most specifically the work of people like Eddie Webster and others who had been in NUSAS’ Wages Commission in the mid-Seventies. (...) And so the sort of knowledge of the trade union movement was being brought onto the campuses by these Wages Commission people. And although (...) there were no joint actions at that point in time between students and (...) organised workers, there was this linkage and at the same time this sort of radical intellectual thinking.

Connecting students to the labour movement was a feature of all the New Left student movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The ideas of connecting these social groups did not only come from a Marxist
analysis of Capitalism which identifies the working class as the main force of change. They were also, as in the case of Eddie Webster, the result of practical experiences. Going to study in Oxford was ‘quite a decisive move, because (…) it was the time of the New Left’.

I took a job with the local motorcar factory, on the assembly line. And I was absolutely – for the first time in my life I came across a shop steward, who could bring the factory to a standstill in a moment. And I thought, ‘Gee, this is it, you know! This is how we can change apartheid here.’ You know, labour can do it in a non-violent way. (…) I think what attracted me (…) was that it was non-violent and there was power in the art of production and (…) the work was all being done by black people.

These accounts show how ideas, practical experiences, and political conjunctures amalgamate with individual capacities. Marxist ideas of the New Left became attractive for individuals who were critical of their societies all over the world. Not least, it was through the movements of people that these ideas travelled globally. The ‘68 movement’ was a global movement, which was lived differently in different parts of the world but where people in different contexts learned from each other, sometimes indirectly, by reading the same authors (Mulinari & Räthzel, 2007). In our case learning occurred through a mediator who could translate experiences derived from one political context to another and had the capacity to teach and inspire people eager to transform the societies they lived in.

**Isaac Kopano**: entering the trade union movement

For Isaac, our second protagonist, the theme of connecting became equally important, though as a result of different experiences. Born into a black family in Cape Town, he was first politicized by his father, who had left the Anglican church because of their racism. During his days in high school, Isaac participated in political meetings, organized by the students. After finishing school, Isaac chose to work in a factory, in order to become part of the workers’ movement. Isaac describes his and his friends’ decision as being motivated by the Black Consciousness Movement (Hirschmann, 1990) that had developed at the time and was critical of white-dominated University education.

It proved not easy to organize the workers at the factory into the union and looking for solutions to the problems they were facing. Marxist theory and the term connections emerged in Isaac’s narrative:

So, I think what happened is that our SACTU* work wasn’t moving, (…) and we were hearing all the sort of critical stuff about the ANC (…). And I think for the first time in probably 1980 we got into the first readings of Marxism. You know, the world outlook about this just opened our eyes about connections between us as workers and it’s not (…) race and apartheid.

The connections Isaac became aware of were connections that could override the differences of ‘race’ and create a form of connectivity that aimed at a more fundamental societal transformation than ending apartheid. For this learning process to develop, individuals are named as decisive influences:

Look, I mean, what happened is that Jeremy Baskin, who was a unionist and was banned in ’77, (…) He ran a bookshop in Cape Town, a Left bookshop. So that’s where we’d get all the Marx and Lenin! (…) He was a banned person – he’s not supposed to speak, so he was sitting in this bookshop and selling all these books. I used to go there and buy books, and he was interested that I was coming regularly to buy. And, when there’s no one in the shop, because he’s not supposed to speak to people, he would ask who I am and what I do. (…) So, it’s him who then put us in contact with SACTU.

For Jane, it was important to find a centre where struggles of students, communities, and workers could be brought together. Similarly, Isaac connects issues from the Black Consciousness Movement
with a Marxist analysis of class relations, which positions workers at the centre, overruling racial divisions. Coming from different socio-political spaces both eventually meet in one theoretical-strategic space (even if not in person at that time) defining labour as the centre, the main actor who could overcome apartheid.

Another feature that comes across in both accounts is the importance of individuals as translators, educators, and mediators between the world of experiences and the world of theory, finding theories that could make sense of their experiences and provide a guide book for change. As Brecht (2000, p. 568) once said, we do not know whether we cannot fully explain how individuals act because they decide freely, or because there are so many determinants needed for an explanation that we can never know them all. What we can try to explain though is how experiences made through the life-course influence the way in which subsequent issues are understood and experienced. In the following, we will thus try to explain how Isaac’s and Jane’s ways into the union and the meaning they gave to the environment was influenced by their former experiences.

Routes into environmental politics

Both our protagonists came to work on environmental issues in the context of international conferences taking place in South Africa. They were given the task of developing a trade union position towards the conference themes. Jane describes this as follows:

The ITF (International Transport Workers Federation) was one of the first global union federations to directly take up the Climate Change challenge … we’re just going back three years now: it’s just, like, yesterday! 2009, really, the ITF started to take up the issue and set up a correspondence group to help develop a climate change policy which would then go to the 2010 ITF Congress, which was held in Mexico City. And I was part of that reference group.

This sounds like a pragmatic way into climate change policies, a consequence of Jane’s position, not of her interest. But as it happens when life stories are narrated, the author feels a need to create a coherent story, where present moves are explainable by previous experiences and thus Jane continues:

Probably, you know, my conscious interest and direct interest is really quite recent. But if I were to trace it back: (…) I mean, this sounds a bit naff, but I mean, I’ve always really appreciated the wildlife and natural resources of South Africa. And I guess that was down to my parents and the kind of holidays we had when I was a kid. (…)

And then at university, you know, there were groups of students – I wasn’t directly involved myself, but I knew a lot of people who (…) went out into the countryside and built schools and water wells and so on. And so, this campaign to bring the curriculum closer to the needs of people kind of intersected with student activists who were doing direct community work. (…) So, I guess, I started to see the link between underdevelopment as a sort of economic concept and what it was actually doing to people’s immediate environments.

Actually, thinking back, my connection a little bit predated this stuff. Because I’d had a direct interest in Health & Safety issues (…) And one of the people they [her former union] drew on was a woman (…), who was from San Francisco (…) she also did a lot of work on the issue of incineration and the health – the air pollution impacts of incineration. So, this was like (…) early to late Nineties, my interest in environmental health and health in the workplace and so on, and I got exposed for the first time to the connections between workplace and environmental issues. (…) So, I guess (…) there were sort of threads of interest that came together in a much more concrete way when the ITF took up the issue of climate.
We have quoted Jane’s reflections in detail because they represent the three dominant ways in which people, whether unionists or not, perceive the environment.

First, it is experienced as the opposite of the built environment, a space to be enjoyed and experienced for recreation, nature, and wildlife, and a space untouched by humans. In the next sentence, Jane inserts people into this pristine nature, the hardships of those who work the land and can hardly live on and of it. In this perception nature, the land and the people working on it are distant from Jane’s experiences. They are part of another world which hardly ever enters the lived experience of urbanized individuals. These perceptions can be called ‘nature as labour’s other’ (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013).

It is only in the third account that nature enters into the world of labour, when its destruction constitutes a threat to the health of workers. When specific work practices have negative effects on workers’ health, destroyed nature functions as a mediator of this threat. Still, nature is perceived as being outside of the production process, a space that can be damaged by work. Nature needs to be protected because its destruction threatens workers.

These are the three perceptions of nature we have found in the majority of our 121 interviews. Isaac did not recollect experiences with nature. Instead, he remembered an experience with an environmental movement:

I remember (...) David Fig7 (...) had all these ideas. He was a member of an anti-nuclear group called Koeberg Alert8 (...). I knew David soon about nuclear, but that was not – I was busy in the townships. I knew what Koeberg Alert was, and – that was not a big issue.

The immediate conflicts in the townships override concerns for issues that seem not only spatially far away, but also far less urgent. As in Jane’s case, public intellectuals were decisive in changing Isaac’s views:

It’s only when I went around doing workshops in the union on WSSD in 2002 that, ‘Okay, Rio, biodiversity. Okay, how this links up with (...) my other political outlook and challenging that. (...) And then Bellamy Foster9 came to South Africa, and we had a meeting with a few comrades about Marxism and the environmental question and … So that’s all 2002! And he left me with a book on Marxist ecology! So, I started reading on that, (...) it’s not too long, not too deep!

In contrast to Jane, for Isaac the main question is whether the ecology can be integrated into his ‘political outlook’, into the analysis of society and the development of strategies to transform it. His approach to the environmental question is theoretical and political.

In spite of their different approaches to environmental policies, both Isaac and Jane have had a decisive influence in developing a climate policy within their respective unions. After running a series of workshops on climate change with members of her union, Jane presented a climate change policy for SATAWU which included the following demands:

The evidence suggests that the transition to a low carbon economy will potentially create more jobs than it will lose. But we have to campaign for protection and support for workers whose jobs or livelihoods might be threatened by the transition. (...) New environmentally-friendly jobs provide an opportunity to redress many of the gender imbalances in employment and skills. The combination of these interventions is what we mean by a just transition.

Isaac has been decisive in creating research teams of workers in his union to promote sustainable production methods and in developing a climate change policy that is built around the notion of ‘energy democracy’, socially owned and democratically controlled renewable energy. The programme of NUMSA states:
This resolution explicitly commits the union to finding climate justice solutions from below as part of struggling for a deep transition to a low-carbon economy based on renewable energy sources.

Central to the political economy of a just transition is a political commitment to build a socially owned renewable energy sector which is made up of different forms of socialised property – cooperatives, municipal ownership and socialised parastatals. Such a sector should also ensure the promotion of locally manufactured renewable energy technologies.

These quotes emphasize specific aspects in each programme. While both programmes contain aims for a deep transition of society and the creation of jobs, the emphasis on societal transformation is stronger in the NUMSA programme, while the SATAWU programme’s emphasis is on job creation and protection. We cannot reduce these emphases to the positions of our two protagonists, because such programmes are decided collectively, different positions have to be merged into a programme approved by a majority. However, if we take these quotes as examples of different possible approaches to union environmental policies they can be understood as emerging from different concerns which can be explained by different – by no means mutually exclusive – goals.

In the SATAWU formulation, the emphasis is on workers’ jobs, their skills and the need for an environmental policy, which secures workers’ interests and can help solving injustices like ‘gender imbalances’ at work. The emphasis is on the immediate, everyday interests of workers. The NUMSA document centres around a ‘deep transition to a low-carbon economy’ defined as the creation of a ‘socially owned renewable energy sector’. While both visions are essential building blocks of an environmental policy from below (and both can be found in both documents), one can trace the different ways in which our protagonists came to connect environmental issues with their previous socio-political trajectories. Labour became the central concern of the worldviews and practices of Jane and Isaac. But while Jane connects her engagement with her personal and political experiences, Isaac’s engagement is derived from his political and theoretical concepts. While the programme which Jane has been decisive in formulating takes workers’ daily well-being as a point of departure, the programme Isaac has helped to formulate situates environmental politics and the creation of jobs, within a societal process of transformation.

We could explain these differences with the ways in which women and men are taught to make sense of the world and to contribute to the creation of society. While women’s societal role is to care about individuals, men’s societal role is to act in the public realm. We could see the traces of these social positionings in the different ways in which Jane and Isaac narrate their life experiences, even though both have been engaged in the struggles against apartheid and devoted their lives to the workers’ movement. Gender relations do not only play out through the ways in which labour processes are structured, namely that the care sector and housework are predominantly women’s work, but also through the ways in which the same issues and tasks may be understood and dealt with differently from a woman’s and from a man’s experiences.¹⁰

**Connecting labour and environmental issues**

When asked, which challenges they see for the development of environmental policies in the union movement, Jane and Isaac give similar answers, problematizing the task of connecting the environmental with the labour issue. Jane explains:

Another challenge is the fact that the world has become so much more complicated and the issues that the trade union movement is expected to tackle, from skills through to advancing employment equity, dealing with much more complicated wage systems, through to the political challenges – I mean, it’s a huge range of issues. (...)
But for me, the opportunity is in recognising that there are people on the ground (…) who are making those local connections. And so, instead of just piling the environment onto already full plates at the centre, the real challenge is making the connection with people who are organically taking up those issues on the ground, whether it’s racism, environmental issues, or gender equity issues, whatever.

Isaac:

The biggest challenges in some of the work, is how do you talk about issues of climate change and environmental degradation and choices to be made around that, when for many people the choices are about just having a job or holding onto a job? And how do you integrate that into other concerns of ordinary people?

The problematic relationship between promises for the future (400,000 jobs, in socially owned renewable energy) and pressuring present needs is exacerbated by historical experiences. Under apartheid, environmentalism involved authoritarian practices more concerned with the conservation of threatened plants, animals, and wilderness areas than with the social needs of people. Particularly for many black South Africans, dispossession was the other side of conservation as the creation of national parks and game reserves involved mass removals (Walker, 2008). This historical legacy linked to widespread poverty means that environmentalism remains stigmatized. However, as Isaac further explains, the difficulty of connecting workers’ and environmental needs is rooted in a lack of a political and theoretical integration.

The (environmental) issue must be taken in its own right, in terms of its own concerns. Because sometimes I feel that it could be climate change, it could be something else tomorrow – as long as you can make the political points. (…) Okay, maybe there is the issue about the environment, but really, it’s the political points that want to be made. (…) It’s not really the environment, it’s capitalism. (…) But you can say, what about food prices (…) And so the issue is not really integrated into one perspective and outlook.

Isaac suggests a similar solution to the one described by Jane, namely to go back to base, to people and their experiences in order to develop the connection:

My view about this is: how do you deal with issues that confront people and how climate change is affecting them? (…) I strongly believe it’s only when people understand that and then can say collectively what the solutions are (…) I mean, my main thing is not: “Look, there’s hell here and there’s heaven there” (…) It’s to look at what are the causes of some of what they experience and see what are the alternatives to that. But that’s after understanding the causes. (…) then it’s up to them and you to say, “Look, what do we do about this, and what are the alternatives?” (…) Okay, maybe there’ll be jobs. But let’s see that! But it’s them understanding what’s affecting them. And then they can be fully-fledged agents searching what to do. So that’s how my approach to the work is.

It is in Jane’s and Isaac’s similar approach to the challenges of creating environmental union policies that we can recognize a common practice that has marked their life trajectories: their trust in people’s transformative practices from below and the will and ability to connect seemingly disparate issues and movements: students’, women’s, and workers’ struggles; workplace struggles and township struggles; the struggle against apartheid and the workers’ struggles against capitalism. But they emphasize different dimensions of their perspectives: while Jane stresses the need to build on local movements that already exist, Isaac stresses the need for education, supporting people in understanding the causes of their troubles, so they are able to act accordingly.

Isaac and Jane would surely support each other’s position. We might therefore be seen as over-stressing their differences. However, we can trace these differences throughout their life stories, where Jane speaks more often about connecting struggles, while Isaac discusses the need of
connecting within a political theory. What they have in common is an insight into the need of connections to create successful policies and practices.

**Beyond the nature–labour divide**

Isaac’s and Jane’s different accentuations exist under an overarching common insight that ‘labour is where it’s at’ as Jane formulates it. It is this emphasis on the centrality of labour, which leads to a perception of Capital as affecting nature/the environment in a way that threatens the health and ultimately the survival of workers and communities. But to centre all struggles around labour can have the effect of subordinating other struggles to the needs of labour. While workers are perceived as part of the capitalist system, oppressed by capital as well as fighting back and thereby shaping the way in which capitalism can act, nature is seen as existing outside this system, a passive entity on which capitalism can act without being itself affected by it. This is a perception that the environmental historian Moore (2015) has criticized as ‘Cartesian dualism’,11 perceiving nature and society as separate entities (see also Smith, 1991/2008). To explain the problem of the nature–labour dualism we can even go back to Marx’s critique of the first socialist programme in Europe, the Gotha programme of the German socialist party. To the programme’s statement that labour is ‘… the source of all wealth and all culture’, Marx replied:

> Labor is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power. (…) The bourgeois have very good grounds for falsely ascribing supernatural creative power to labor; since precisely from the fact that labor depends on nature it follows that the man who possesses no other property than his labor power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labor [nature, authors]. He can only work with their permission, hence live only with their permission. (1875)

Marx’ critique can help to understand why it is difficult for unions to integrate environmental and labour struggles. Challenging the dualism of labour and nature he argues that not only can labour do nothing without nature since all work transforms nature but also that labour is itself part of nature. This means that perceiving the relationship between nature and labour only in negative terms, as capitalist production destroying nature and thereby threatening workers does not capture the inseparable relationship between labour and nature. For better or for worse, there is no way in which labour and nature can be separated. Nature is not out there, outside of production, outside of people’s daily lives, a recreational space only. The inseparability of labour and nature does not depend on whether the relations of production are capitalist, socialist, or feudalist. What is different in different societal formations is the way in which we can call the ‘societal relations of nature’ are organized. Capitalism like any other societal formation shapes but is also itself shaped by those relations.

Marx argues that the bourgeoisie is interested in ascribing ‘supernatural powers’ to labour as the only source of wealth. This is because such a view concedes the conditions of labour, namely nature, to Capital. Through the private appropriation of nature, Capital makes labour dependent on it, since without nature as a condition and resource no production process can take place. Consequently, not to integrate nature into trade union strategies, has the effect of reinforcing Capital’s claim on nature as its own private good. Trade unions may demand the right to work, but this right is useless without the right to nature as a condition for their work.

We increasingly see struggles against the private appropriation of nature by rural communities and peasant’s movements for whom the relationship between nature and labour is more evident. Unfortunately, there are not many instances in which industrial unions have supported such
struggles. The conviction that labour is the source of all wealth and therefore also the source of all struggles may bear fruit in fighting for wages and working times, but it also reduces labour to a political force, ignoring its productive force, which can only be acknowledged when labour and nature are seen as two sides of the same process, as allies in the production process.

Such an insight could shift the emphasis from a negative perception (the damage that environmental degradation inflicts on workers and their communities) to an all-encompassing productive relationship with nature. This in turn could become a point of departure for workers to investigate how they transform themselves through the way they transform nature within and outside the production, and thereby to enable them to envisage changes that can better their lives through improving their relation to nature—a perspective Isaac stated. This would include the awareness that there is no pristine nature. We live in ‘a web of life’ as Moore (2015) named it, being part of nature and changing nature with every breath we take. The question is not whether, but how humans change nature so they can survive in and through it.

A more generalized perception of the inextricable relationship between nature and labour could also serve to strengthen the links between rural and urban communities and between environmental movements and labour movements. It would require environmental movements to rethink their understanding of and approach to nature which often excludes labour or regards it as the enemy. As Jane and Isaac have made clear, labour is a key to societal transformation. However, a more just society will only be realized if nature can be wrestled away from privatization, from the destructive exploitation by Capital.

Concluding comments

We have sought to track the formation of two key individuals in the South African trade union movement, by examining the forces and influences that made them leaders of change. We asked how Jane and Isaac became part of the trade union movement and how they became involved in setting environmental issues on the trade union agenda. We found that for both, making connections has been a decisive feature of their life trajectories—connections between movements, issues, places, and theories. We concluded that their ability to make those connections helped them to engage in connecting labour and environmental struggles. Both recognized that this is a ‘moment of danger’ for the South African working classes and that nothing short of transformation is required.

We have argued that the requirements of political conjunctures in certain places and at certain times (for instance, the central role of labour in fighting apartheid in South Africa) have shaped the thinking and political outlook of individuals in ways that can also create barriers to the development of new strategies when the character of conflicts change. In this case, the centrality of labour has been simultaneously a driving force for change as well as a barrier to a fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between labour and nature.

In 1990, the novelist Nadine Gordimer said, ‘Progressive forces in our country are pledged to one of the most extraordinary events in world social history, the complete reversal of everything that, for centuries, has ordered the lives of all our people’ (Gordimer, 1990). Over more than 20 years later that ‘reversal’, now framed as ‘the unfinished revolution’ or ‘total transformation’, implies that in addition to a generalized commitment to change there is a need to identify what change needs to comprise. The dualism of labour and nature needs to be transformed into a concept that sees labour and nature as inextricably linked allies in producing and reproducing a human/nature–nature/society world. Humans need to be conceptualized as an inter-connected part of one ecological community. In order to enable a ‘deep transformation’ of our Capitalist societies, liberated from the
exploitation of both nature and humans, it is necessary to demand social ownership of renewables, or of energy in general, and to fight for the creation of climate jobs. However, this is not sufficient. To challenge Capital’s private ownership of the means of production includes the explicit challenge of its private ownership of nature, since without nature, there is no labour.

Notes

1. Nora Räthzel, David Uzzell (project leaders) Beatriz Leandro, Patricia Tropia (Brazil), Nilanjan Pande, Payoshni Mitra, Piya Chakraborty (India), Tamara Walker, Jacklyn Cock (South Africa), Ragnar Lundström (Sweden).
3. Edward Webster, Emeritus Professor at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, has been one of the most important public intellectuals in South Africa. He founded the Sociology of Work Unit at the Department of Sociology, helped the formation of black labour unions during the anti-apartheid struggle and is until today a decisive link between academic research and labour activism (Burawoy, 2010; Räthzel, 2016).
4. NUSAS set up the Wages Commission (WC), where students investigated the wages and working conditions of unskilled black university staff. Ultimately, it aimed to gather information and publicize ‘starvation wages’ in other industries too.
5. This name is a pseudonym.
7. David Fig is an environmental sociologist specialising in energy and corporate behaviour. He is currently a Fellow at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam: https://eeu.academia.edu/DavidFig.
8. Koeberg Alert is an anti-nuclear activist organisation formed in 1983 as a local campaign against South Africa’s nuclear programme, in particular the construction of the Koeberg Nuclear Power Station.
9. John Bellamy Foster is professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon and editor of the journal Monthly Review. His main publications are devoted to the development of a Marxist theory of Ecology.
10. To avoid misunderstandings, this does not imply that every individual acts according to their societal gender position, but it does explain gender-specific approaches where they are visible.
11. For an elaboration of this thinking, see Moore (2015).

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