



Executive Summary

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# Trade Unions and Just Transition

Current Situation,  
Potential and Constraints

Global Climate Strike  
Küresel İklim Grevi



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The full report in Turkish is  
available at  
<https://www.disk.org.tr> and  
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**The Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DİSK)**

is the umbrella organisation of 22 sectoral trade unions, uniting under the principles of class and mass unionism, representing approximately 245,000 workers. Established in 1967, DİSK is a member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

For further information: <https://disk.org.tr/category/news/>

**Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe** is Europe's leading NGO coalition fighting dangerous climate change. We are a unique network, in which environmental and development organisations work together to issue joint lobby campaigns and maximise their impact. With over 200 member organisations active in 40 European countries, representing over 1,700 NGOs and more than 40 million citizens, CAN Europe promotes sustainable climate, energy and development policies throughout Europe.

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## Executive Summary

### JUST TRANSITION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### The importance of making social policy an integral part of the strategy for combating climate change

In the global fight against climate change, the process of transitioning from fossil-fuel-based energy sources to renewable ones has complex, and significant, technological, economic and social effects. Ensuring that this transformation to a decarbonised and sustainable production process does not create technological and socio-economic injustices, and is instead socially beneficial, requires careful attention to the problems that may arise during the transition, particularly in the area of employment policies.

The new employment areas that will emerge with the transformation of production systems under climate-friendly policies will create new needs for training and adaptation processes in order to ensure that the existing labour force achieves the qualification levels necessary to meet the demands of these new jobs. In addition, plans must be put in place to mitigate the fact that some jobs will disappear, and some economic sectors will be adversely affected by the transition to net-zero emission production systems.

If appropriate employment and social policies are not developed to support the energy transition process, it risks creating problems that may do irreparable harm to society, particularly to the working class. These problems may include mass unemployment, the spread of precarious working arrangements, damage to social security systems, the emergence of serious educational gaps, the further concentration of power and wealth among small circles of people, taxation injustices, greater polarisation between skilled and unskilled workers, a dangerous mismatch between labour demand and labour supply, wage stagnation and increased inequality overall. Discussions about social justice related to the transition to renewable energy sources must additionally take into consideration not only the groups directly affected by this transformation process, but also those that will indirectly feel its effects.

#### Conceptual Framework for Just Transition

A just transition can be defined as a labour-oriented approach that prevents efforts to protect the environment from taking precedence over the welfare of workers and society. Especially in the 1970s, the concept of just transition was first articulated by the labour movement as a “trade union demand”. In the following decades, this concept has expanded to encompass the objective of creating a sustainable economy that is focused on combating climate change while simultaneously providing decent employment opportunities.

One of the basic principles of just transition is that the working class should not be adversely affected by the transformation of production relations and



priority sectors in order to combat climate change, and that solutions to the problems that do emerge should be created through policies that take into account the working class and their families. In sum, the demand for a just transition calls for a transformation process that respects nature, ensures strong social security networks and creates new jobs worthy of human dignity.

As part of these discussions, governments have an important role in terms of creating public policies in an environment where all parties can effectively participate in decision-making processes in order to realise the goals of a just transition. Under their leadership, the main objectives to be realised in a participatory manner include:

- Establishing the necessary assistance mechanisms for displaced workers;
- Ensuring workers' access to adequate information on changes in production processes and closures at the workplace;
- Enabling the consultation and full participation of trade unions in decision-making processes;
- Investing in research, development and infrastructure;
- Providing support mechanisms for new local industries;
- Expanding skills development and vocational trainings;

- Supporting the elderly, disabled and disadvantaged groups;
- Expanding income security and educational opportunities;
- Establishing integrated social security practices such as early retirement;
- Providing favourable credit facilities and incentives for new industries and employers; and
- Creating employment guarantees.

### A Historical Perspective on Just Transition

It was in the United States of America in the 1970s that labour unions first voiced a demand for a just transition. The harmonisation of labour and environmental policies, and the protection of both environmental and workers' rights within the scope of the policies implemented, have been among the unions' key demands.

During the 1980s and 1990s, demands for just transition became more vocal and the definition of the concept began to expand. The demand was institutionalised with the establishment of the Just Transition Alliance, a coalition of environmental justice organisations and labour groups.

The demand for a just transition gained further momentum in the 2000s, when it became a topic frequently raised by various trade unions and confederations at both the national and international level, solidifying its definition as a trade union approach to combating climate change.

Further expansions of the concept took place in the 2000s, when the idea of a just transition started to be addressed more often in scientific terms. The different definitions and debates put forward by various segments of society have, however, prevented the emergence of a single framework for carrying out a just transition.

### The Role of Social Dialogue in the Demand for Just Transition

Designing and implementing participatory mechanisms is crucial for a just transition approach that seeks the involvement of all types of stakeholders. The creation of a participatory process is also crucial for workers to become drivers of environmental change. A successful just transition process depends on the joint participation of actors through an effective social dialogue mechanism that aims to achieve consensus and harmony between workers, employers and other parties and governments on a consultative basis, in cooperation with local initiatives. Both strong government support and diverse participatory policies are essential for a just transition.

It should be noted that just transition can be successfully carried out in a democratic context. In authoritarian and autocratic regimes, the social injustices caused by such transition processes will be intensified. Participation of all parties in the transition process requires first and foremost that they be provided with the tools that will enable them to seize various opportunities and take active roles in decision-making processes.

<sup>1</sup> Turkey signed the Paris Agreement on 22 April 2016 but did not ratify it until 7 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The Declaration was signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, all EU Member States, Norway, Canada and New Zealand. It is an extension of the coal phase-out commitments of more than 40 countries.

## INTERNATIONAL BASES FOR THE JUST TRANSITION DEMAND

Climate justice, which is at the heart of just transformation, has become an increasingly important topic at both the national and international level in recent years. In this respect, the agreements put forward by the United Nations and the legal bases created in line with them are extremely important in terms of institutionalising the just transition discussions and making them part of international law.

After the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change entered into force in 1994, the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC started to be organised annually as the main decision-making forum on the Convention. These meetings have resulted in a series of historical turning points in terms of just transition.

When the Paris Agreement<sup>1</sup> was adopted by 196 countries and the EU at COP21 in 2015, the concept of just transition was included in the text, thus putting this demand forward concretely in an international document on the green transformation process.

At COP24 in 2018, the Silesia Declaration on Solidarity and Just Transition was adopted, highlighting the need to further address the vulnerability of labour markets in carbon-intensive sectors.

With the adoption at the end of COP26 in 2021 of the Declaration on Supporting the Conditions for a Just Transition at the International Level, more than 30 countries, including major coal-producing nations, have committed to implement strategies to support workers, businesses and communities in the transition to a greener economy.<sup>2</sup>



In addition, when the 17 Sustainable Development Goals were set at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in 2015, goal number eight was devoted to “decent work and economic growth”, and as such has an important place in the just transition.

## Just Transition in the European Union

The goal of ensuring a just transition within the European Union countries, in which the socio-economic impacts of the transition to a net-zero economy are mitigated and no one is left behind, is backed financially by the Just Transition Fund<sup>3</sup>. This fund is expected to provide billions of euros in support between 2021 and 2027 to the regions that will be most affected by energy transition. The European Green Deal, which was prepared as a response to the issue of combating climate change, also has a very important shaping effect on the EU's strategies in this area. The main objective of this agreement is to transform the EU economy so that it is ready for a sustainable future, while also serving as an economic lifeline out of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

The European Green Deal Investment Plan creates a framework that mobilises EU funds to facilitate and incentivise the public and private investments

needed for the transition to a climate-neutral, green, competitive and inclusive economy.

## The International Trade Union Movement and Just Transition

During the 2000s, the fight against climate change started to take a prominent place on the agenda and objectives of international trade unions. At the 2006 Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment, discussions were opened on a new labour internationalism and a commitment to combat climate change was announced. At the second such assembly, held in 2012, the climate agenda and trade union demands were discussed together.

International trade unions have discussed on different platforms how the limited positive attitude towards the demand for just transition as part of the Paris Agreement can be improved, and how to put just transition more prominently on the agenda of employers and governments. They have also published various declarations and reports setting out important findings on these topics. In 2016, as a concrete step on just transition, the International Trade Union Confederation established a Just Transition Centre. Employers, meanwhile, are involved in just tran-

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism_en)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.usimp.org.tr/uploads/UPF21/sibel\\_tuzun.pdf](https://www.usimp.org.tr/uploads/UPF21/sibel_tuzun.pdf)



sition discussions not only as individual companies but also through business associations. One of the most important of these is the B-Team, which emphasises the need for businesses to take responsibility for creating solutions that fight against poverty, promote environmentally friendly policies and take egalitarian approaches. The B-Team was formed by senior executives of many international companies and representatives of various organisations. Its vice-chair as of 2022 when this report was written was Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary.

The strategies and policies put forward by the ITUC during the Covid-19 pandemic expanded its discourse on just transition based on the fact that social injustices and inequalities became much more visible during the pandemic. Accordingly, ITUC drew attention to the need for a new global social contract for the post-pandemic future that emphasises fundamental rights, fair policies on minimum wage and working hours, and ensuring occupational health and safety.

## JUST TRANSITION DEBATES IN TURKEY IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADE UNION STRATEGIES

In order to reveal the demands and proposals specific to Turkey within the scope of the global just transition agenda and to make visible the extent of just transition debates within the Turkish trade union movement, this study included a field research as well as a desk study involving document and record analysis. Within the scope of the field research, interviews were conducted with representatives of trade unions for workers and civil servants, including both union officers/experts and union executives.

The findings of this research are reflected in the report together with the information obtained during the desk analyses in order to illuminate the general framework of just transition debates in Turkey.

### Just Transition as a Eurocentric Concept and the Need for a Turkey-Specific Just Transition Formulation

Globally, and especially in Europe, just transition policies have been the subject of intense discussion, with numerous initiatives and studies being carried out worldwide under the leadership of international organisations in order to reduce the negative effects on working life of the transformation experienced in the process of combating climate change.

However, discussions on this issue are still quite new in Turkey, and have not yet found a full response within the country's trade union movement. Although trade unions in Turkey are engaged with the issue of combating climate change, just transition is not yet a concept that they reflect in their policy texts, directly put on the agenda in detail or discuss amongst themselves. Moreover, trade union representatives also express their concerns about the fact that just transition discussions have been brought to the agenda in Turkey by parties and actors other than trade unions. They emphasise that the conceptual framework of just transition should be discussed together with, and in the language of, trade unions.

It is noteworthy that many trade union representatives interviewed during the preparation of this report defined just transition as a Eurocentric concept and emphasised that discussions on it have been structured in a way that takes into account the priorities in Europe rather than those in Turkey. In addition, they said that this topic has not taken a prominent place on the agenda of trade unions in Turkey because there has not yet been any actual loss of employment in the country due to the transition away from fossil fuels.

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Trade union representatives in Turkey also spoke about the importance of company incentives in protecting employment, a topic that is at the forefront in just transition debates, especially in Europe. In this respect, the European stance of protecting employment through the transfer of public resources to the private sector was considered as one of the main reasons why trade unions, especially in Turkey, distanced themselves from the related discussions. The general view of the union representatives interviewed was that the just transition policies that would be accepted by the unions could be created by companies making concessions from their own profits, and that public resources should be allocated directly to labour-oriented policies.

Union representatives believe that expecting the private sector to finance this transformation out of its own pocket is a very reasonable demand, especially in a country like Turkey where labour costs are quite low. They say that just transition discussions should also be put on the agenda as redistribution policies.

One of the issues emphasised by the union representatives was that just transition should be considered as a twin concept, in which it is impossible to consider climate change and technological transformation separately from each other. The fact that the transition to a production system that is more sensitive to climate change will also require a change in automation was additionally brought up as an issue that should be emphasised.

### *National-level Studies in Turkey*

Efforts to establish a legal infrastructure on climate change in Turkey started to gain momentum after the adoption of the Paris Agreement. The coun-

try's main plans for meeting short- and long-term climate goals are focused on employment opportunities, creating new jobs and providing for the common good. However, none of these plans emphasise the creation and improvement of suitable for human dignity and/or sustainable green jobs,<sup>5</sup> effective protection of the right to work or revision of legislation in line with the fight against climate change as a goal or strategy. In this respect, it would not be incorrect to state that the strategies for combating climate change put forward by Turkey have been handled in a way that fails to address labour and social policy concerns.

### **Harmonising the Legal Environment for Workers to Facilitate an Effective Just Transition Agenda**

Due to the link between labour and nature, it is not possible to separate labour law from climate change. Changes and degradation in the ecological system seriously affect the health, safety and fair working conditions of workers. On the other hand, decent working conditions can allow employees and employers to interact with nature in a sustainable way. In order to protect the rights of employees from harm due to climate change, nature must also be protected; this requires nature-integrated regulations within the scope of labour law. However labour legislation in Turkey has limited, or even non-existent, regulations to protect employees, especially the working class, from the negative impacts they may face in their working conditions as a result of climate change.

**During the just transition process, labour regulations and social policy recommendations can only become concrete rights as long as they are legally protected. Thus, the application and the**

<sup>5</sup> Climate jobs are defined as jobs with decent working conditions that directly contribute to mitigating the climate crisis by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, such as through the installation of solar panels, designing energy- and material-saving devices or reducing oil and gas consumption. These jobs are different from the broader category of green jobs, which can include jobs such as pollution control workers or sustainability managers (Uncular, 2022a: 265; Campaign against Climate Change, 2014).



**legal dimension of just transition policies must be evaluated together and discussed in an intersectional manner.**

### *Alternative Working Methods and Arrangements*

Any transformation in production processes within the scope of combating climate change will also bring about a major change in terms of labour relations. Thus it is of utmost importance to address working methods and arrangements, including working hours, termination of employment and other related issues, in a way that supports the principle of “leaving no one behind”, in order to establish concrete just transition policies that protect the rights and interests of workers.

In the interviews conducted with trade union representatives, the shortening of weekly working hours without any loss of income and jobs, and without contributing to any form of employment precarity, drew attention as a concrete proposal to prevent employment losses.

In addition, they said regulations such as extending the paid period during which workers can search for other employment, revising the termination notice periods in favour of the worker in cases due to climate-related transformations,

and regulations counting participation in activities such as training that are needed in the job-search process as working time should also be opened to discussion.

### *Integrity of Trade Union Rights for a Just Transition: Freedom of Association, Collective Bargaining and the Right to Strike*

Considering that a just transition has historically emerged as a trade union demand, unions have important responsibilities to ensure that labour-oriented policies are put into effect as part of the transformation process. In addition to the protective clauses to be added to collective bargaining agreements, changes to be made in the legislation on collective labour law can also guide and support unions in this process.

During the interviews, union representatives emphasised that most of the demands for solutions to existing problems both in the labour market and within the trade union movement in Turkey are also important for the just transition discussions. **In this sense, they expressed the view that it would not be very effective to discuss the just transition agenda without eliminating the existing problems in the labour market and the existing obstacles to trade union rights and freedoms.**

The inclusion of just transition policies in the scope and subject matter of collective bargaining negotiations was also emphasised by union representatives.

The fact that the right to strike in Turkey is only possible within the scope of disputes that arise in the process of making collective bargaining agreements—and that “politically motivated strikes and lockouts, solidarity strikes and lockouts, general strikes and lockouts, workplace occupations, work slowdowns, productivity reductions and other [forms of] resistance” are considered illegal—constitute an obstacle to workers’ collective expression of their demands for a just transition.

Trade union representatives emphasise that just transition should be addressed through proactive, preventive policies rather than reactive ones. In this respect, it would be appropriate for trade unions to first enter into collective bargaining and framework agreements in order to be involved in the creation of protective regulations within the scope of just transition policies. Raising workers’ awareness and consciousness about just transition policies and transformation processes through workplace committees and representative offices; developing training modules both within the union and jointly with the employer; creating, adopting and disseminating just transition policy documents in organised workplaces; and collecting measurable data on just transition policies and developing such policies in the light of this data are among the areas where unions can be directly involved in the just transition process. In addition, **just transition should also be considered by trade unions as an organising policy.**

#### *The Janus Face of Social Dialogue in Just Transition Discussions: Multidimensional Cooperation between Parties*

Union representatives frequently mentioned that social dialogue mechanisms, which constitute a basis for negotiation and are extremely important for

mutual exchange of information, are a problematic area in Turkey. They also drew attention to the necessity for empowering trade unions as a social partner and creating opportunities for negotiation on a fair footing with employers.

The need for a solidarity network among trade unions to facilitate the dialogue process and take ownership of this demand was also among the issues highlighted.

The union representatives interviewed pointed to the fact that in certain cases, workers oppose transformation for fear of losing their jobs, and that even the unions can reflectively act in this direction, as an area that needs to be focussed on. They emphasised the importance of making a democratic and political transformation possible in order to break this resistance. Underlining the importance of creating common ground around reasonable and acceptable alternatives, union representatives stated that the environmental movement also has a critical role to play in ensuring that their struggle takes into account the demands of workers’ organisations and the working class.

#### *Just Transition in Terms of Occupational Health and Safety*

It is not possible to look at measures and regulations regarding occupational health and safety independently from just transition policies. Within the scope of the transformation to be experienced in the process of combating climate change, it is extremely important that the responsibilities of employers to address health and safety risks that may arise in working life are clearly expressed and legally recognised.

New hazards and risk factors are likely to emerge in the labour market and at the sectoral level due to climate change. Therefore, risk assessment practices will become more important in the just transition process.

One of the steps that can be taken in terms of occupational health and safety is to arrange the structures of bodies such as committees, representative offices and coordination boards that are established in workplaces in a way that takes into account the just transition process.

### *Just Transition and Social Security Rights*

In the context of changes to be made in the social security system within the scope of just transition policies, regulations on unemployment insurance are among the most crucial. One way to address this would be to create a special provision in the conditions for benefiting from unemployment insurance that includes insured persons whose labour relations are terminated due to transformations resulting from the process of combating climate change. In addition, the premium payment condition and the period required to benefit from unemployment insurance should be eased for such workers.

Practices such as short-time working allowance and/or cash wage support compensation that are jointly contributed to by the employer and the state are among the methods that can be considered in order to prevent the loss of workers' rights in sectors where reduction or stoppage of production is inevitable.

In addition, it is necessary to discuss facilitating arrangements for workers in affected sectors to obtain their retirement rights and to put this issue on the agenda in a way that does not harm job security. According to the union representatives interviewed, people remain in employment in part due to the low social rights and incomes currently held by pensioners; thus, in order to make effective use of employment opportunities, the existing rights of pensioners must be improved.

Among the views expressed is that funds and incentives in a specialised just transition commission established in Turkey should be used for the workers who will be made unemployed in the transformation process. This fund could be used for carry-

ing out the technical transformation of workplaces and vocational training activities.

It is of utmost importance to take into account and put into practice social assistance mechanisms in a way that will guarantee decent living conditions not only for the worker but also for their family, without contributing to a culture of dependency. Workers and their families should be able to benefit from general health insurance benefits indefinitely, until the worker finds a new job, without the requirement of premium payment.

One of the concerns expressed by trade unions about just transition funds is that they would be used to incentivise business or capital rather than to build social security.

### *What Can be Done in the Field of Vocational Training and Vocational Qualifications*

It is a fact that new jobs will emerge in the just transition process and that there will be a need for qualified employees to perform such jobs. In parallel with international developments, developing or updating vocational training in green jobs, jobs in environmentally friendly technologies and climate jobs are among the alternatives that can be considered.

In Turkey, collaborations between the Vocational Qualifications Authority, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) is extremely important in this regard. The practices to be developed through these collaborations will also facilitate the realisation of concrete just transition policies. Policies should be developed to facilitate access to employment for workers who will be affected by the climate-related transformation. In addition, special policies should be put in place to support members of groups such as youth, migrants, women and persons with disabilities in securing employment. In addition to İŞKUR, relevant mechanisms should also be activated through local administrations, especially in regions that are likely to be directly and rapidly affected by the transformation.



## CONCLUSION

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It is essential that discussions on just transition be explained to trade unions and workers in a much better, more comprehensible and clearer way in order to influence future expectations. In this context, it is necessary to develop both training programmes and awareness-raising campaigns that can link the problems with which trade unions are currently facing in terms of the right to work and the right to organise with the just transition debate, thus establishing just transition as an issue integrated with other struggles.

Both the literature review and the interviews with trade union representatives demonstrate the overlap between general labour demands and the demands for a just transition. As the right to work and the right to organise cannot be separated from the demand for a just transition, discussions and policies should take a holistic approach. The demand to discuss climate justice and social justice together in Turkey was frequently expressed by trade union representatives. Therefore, addressing the demands for solutions to the current problems of the working class and trade unions in Turkey is also extremely important in terms of creating a common ground to discuss the just transition agen-

da. Unions frequently expressed the view that the transformation process would be difficult due to ineffective social dialogue mechanisms, long working hours and low wages, and exhibited a high level of concern that these problematic areas will further deepen precariousness during the transformation process.

At the same time, social policy measures should be brought to the forefront among the public demands for a just transition, the state should actively contribute to the organisation of the process by assuming a regulatory and intervening role in all areas from legal regulations on working life to active and passive labour force policies, and new employment areas should be created on the basis of job security. In order to realise the demands for a just transition, the issue should be evaluated in an intersectional way as both a climate and employment problem, and addressed with a holistic approach in cooperation with both climate organisations and trade unions. During the transformation process, priority should be given to training programmes to be implemented through trade unions that are specific to the areas where closures and job losses have occurred or are likely to occur.

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