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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Transformative just transition as redistribution of income and wealth

Karen Bell

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
Email: karen.bell.2@glasgow.ac.uk

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Abstract

Many conceptions of Just Transition focus narrowly on how to create employment opportunities for those in the so called 'dirty' industries who are likely to lose their jobs in the transition to sustainability. However, there is an emerging concept of 'Transformative Just Transition' (TJT) which emphasises the need to entirely transform our societies in order to achieve justice in this transition. What a TJT should include is still being debated. In this article, I propose that the fundamental element needs to be a redistribution of income and wealth – globally, nationally and locally. This would mean the wealthier would inevitably have to reduce their ecological footprint while those on low incomes could afford to meet their social and environmental needs (healthy food, water and housing; adequate energy and transport; etc). This paper discusses the why and how (e.g. climate reparations, progressive environmental taxation) of redistributing income and wealth in order to achieve a TJT. It particularly focuses on the role of labour unions in achieving the necessary redistribution.

Keywords: Inequality; sustainability; poverty; wealth; labour; unions; climate change; basic needs; degrowth

Introduction

More than a decade ago in this journal, Fischer (2014) argued that decarbonisation must be accompanied by redistribution from the Global North to the South. This call echoes ongoing demands from labour unions for a 'Just Transition' (JT) highlighting the equity and justice challenges inherent in the shift toward ecological sustainability. However, campaigns, discourse, and studies on 'redistribution' and JT continue to exist in parallel, with little discussion about their interdependence. I argue here that we need to look at the relationship between these two demands, highlighting the importance of redistribution for achieving JT in its broadest, transformative sense. This paper is, therefore, novel in arguing that redistribution of income and wealth should be the central mechanism through which a Transformative Just Transition (TJT) is achieved.

JT gained significant global prominence with the adoption of the Silesia Declaration on Solidarity and JT at the 2018 UN Climate Change Conference (COP24). It has been framed along a spectrum, ranging from a 'worker-focused' or 'managerial' approach which emphasises jobs and workplace adjustments, to more radical, 'structural,' or 'transformative' agendas (Just Transition Research Collaborative 2018; Morena et al 2020; Kalt 2021; Krawchenko and Gordon 2021). Historically, JT visions have predominantly aligned with the less radical end of this spectrum, focusing on technological change, primarily

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addressing the shift away from fossil fuels while aiming to safeguard workers' livelihoods (Stevis 2023). However, the scope of JT is now expanding toward more transformative societal changes. This broader vision critiques existing economic systems and advocates for rethinking production within the context of planetary boundaries (see, for example, my prior work on JT for defence sector workers – Bell et al 2023). Recently, Ciplet (2025, 4) proposed that advancing JT requires incorporating 'inequality disruption', referring to 'policies and practices implemented as part of climate transitions that weaken or dismantle durable systems of inequality and unjust uses of power and authority'. However, linking JT and redistribution has been surprisingly rare in the literature. To address this gap, I explore how JT needs to not only include redistribution of wealth – locally, nationally, and globally – but be at the core of it.

The urgency of wealth redistribution has become even more pronounced as we grow increasingly aware of the multiple environmental crises confronting humanity. While the affluent consume resources at unsustainable rates, those in poverty continue to struggle for access to basic necessities. To live within the planet's ecological boundaries, we must not only reduce the burden on ecological sinks, but also better share the available resources. It is also apparent that addressing the financial demands of global climate mitigation and adaptation will require a significant reallocation of wealth between nations (Gabbatiss and Tandon 2021). Fischer (2014) noted the tendency in the global economy to siphon resources from South to North and warned that the neglect of global redistribution could undermine the capacity of the South to progress and decarbonise. In order to organise global redistribution in a manner that does not continue to subordinate the South, I have previously argued for international solidarity through labour organising, so as to achieve a decolonised JT (see Bell 2024).

Hence, this paper explores the critical role of reducing economic inequality in achieving JT and argues that it must be a cornerstone of labour organising. It analyses how social inequality contributes to environmental degradation and outlines the necessary steps trade unions and others can take to address this issue. This includes through concrete instruments of redistribution such as climate reparations, progressive environmental taxation, and international funding mechanisms. The paper considers how labour unions can act as advocates for these redistributive measures. Furthermore, it considers the importance of tackling capitalism as the fundamental driver of environmental harms and economic inequality.

The harms resulting from inequality

Around the world, wealth and income disparities are extreme, both within nations and across borders. Recent data indicates that the wealthiest 10% of individuals own nearly 76% of global assets, while the bottom 50% possess just 2% (Chancel et al 2022). Income inequality is on the rise in almost every country (Hickel 2018; Solt 2020; Oxfam 2024). However, the gap between countries is even starker, with life opportunities still largely determined by where one is born (UN 2020).

Before addressing the detrimental environmental impacts of inequality, it is worth considering the wider social, psychological, and economic costs. Research demonstrates that inequality is linked to a wide range of negative outcomes, including increased crime (De Courson and Nettle 2021), higher levels of personal debt (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010), and reduced trust in others (Barone and Mocetti 2016). It is also associated with a decline in community life (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010), poorer physical health (Nettle and Dickens 2022), and rising rates of obesity (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Furthermore, inequality has been linked to higher prevalence of mental illness (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2010), elevated stress levels (Wilkinson and Pickett 2018), and increased instances of drug addiction (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Additional associations include higher rates of

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child abuse (Eckenrode et al 2014), bullying (Due et al 2009), rioting (Dezecache et al 2021), and lower societal wellbeing, overall (Suriyanrattakorn and Chang 2022). While correlation does not imply causation, these associations contribute to our understanding when supported by strong theoretical reasoning. Many of these correlations might be explained by increased personal stress or inadequate funds to satisfy basic needs at the lower end of the income spectrum.

Considering now the link between inequality and environmental harm, studies indicate a positive correlation between economic inequality and higher CO2 emissions in High-Income Countries (Jorgenson et al 2016, 2017; Knight et al 2017), sub-Saharan countries (Baloch et al 2020), and BRIC nations (Baloch and Danish 2022). Other environmental issues have also been linked to inequality, including increased pollution (Torras and Boyce 1998), biodiversity loss (Pandit and Laband 2009), environmentally harmful behaviour (Dorling 2010), and larger ecological footprints (Dorling 2017; Pata et al 2022). For instance, Dorling (2017) demonstrates that more equitable affluent nations, such as South Korea, Japan, and Germany, exhibit lower per capita consumption and emissions compared to more unequal affluent countries such as the United States, Canada, and the UK. These findings suggest that reducing inequality could play a critical role in addressing environmental degradation.

The environmental benefits of redistributing wealth

This section outlines how the environmental benefits of redistribution would occur. Firstly, a more equal society would reduce excess consumption, as wealthier individuals tend to consume more. Studies have shown significant carbon inequality, with High-Income Countries emitting disproportionately more carbon (Chancel and Piketty 2015; Jorgenson et al 2016; Bruckner et al 2022). Globally, the richest 1% of individuals emit nearly 100 times more carbon than the poorest 10% (Chancel and Piketty 2015). Billionaires, specifically, have carbon footprints thousands of times higher than average citizens (Barros and Wilk 2021).

Reducing wealth inequality also decreases 'emulative consumption' (Veblen 1934), where people strive to consume in ways that reflect societal status. This leads to overconsumption, debt, and anxiety as individuals compete to display wealth through larger homes, luxury goods, and vacations (Frank 2020).

Reducing inequality will also have positive environmental effects by promoting more equitable access to resources, which can support sustainable practices across all social groups. With greater access to resources, individuals on lower incomes would have more choices, enabling them to avoid environmentally harmful jobs, housing, diets, transportation, and everyday practices, such as burning rubbish to keep warm (Żuk and Żuk 2024). Research demonstrates that affordability is a key factor in the adoption and expansion of renewable energy (Vona and Patriarca 2011; Almulhim 2022) and that increasing income equality appears to foster greater uptake of renewable energy (Uzar 2020; Tan and Uprasen 2021).

In addition, inequality weakens social cohesion, making collective mobilisation more difficult (Bell 2021). Wealthy individuals are often less concerned about environmental issues, as they can shield themselves from the negative impacts. Inequality is frequently linked to the geographical segregation of income groups, leading to environmental problems being concentrated in low-income areas (Agyeman et al 2003; Boyce 2007; Bell 2014, 2020). At the international level, High-Income Countries may outsource emissions and pollution to Low- and Middle-Income Countries, creating the illusion of environmental progress in wealthier nations, while environmental damage shifts to poorer ones.

High levels of inequality enhance the political influence of the affluent, while depressing that of the poor (Gilens 2012; Schlozman et al 2012; Bartels 2016). Concentrated

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economic and political power can hinder environmental regulation (Knight et al 2017) as elites may resist environmental policies that curtail their economic activities. Inequality also limits the ability of disadvantaged groups to advocate for environmental protection, as their limited time and financial resources can reduce participation in environmental activism (Bell 2020). Moreover, as inequality rises, trust declines, which undermines social solidarity (Ostrom 2008; Stephany 2017; Roberts and Mangold 2021). Furthermore, growing inequality erodes trust in government, making it harder to implement environmental policies, especially those that require changes in individual behaviour (UN 2020).

There is a tendency for low-income communities to reject environmental policies because of the perceived costs (Żuk and Żuk 2024). Environmentalism needs to be seen as pro-poor in order to build a broader movement and resonate with social justice movements. Currently, the climate scepticism of the extreme right (Forchtner 2019) is resonating more with low-income groups as they perceive current environmental policies to be making their lives more insecure and difficult. As the Yellow Vests in France articulated, for some, 'the end of the month' has to be prioritised above 'the end of the world' (Martin and Islar 2021). Similarly, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in Germany and Reform in the UK are now turning to a discourse against climate policy to build support (Berker and Pollex 2021).

Finally, given the limits of the planet, if we reduced inequality, we would still be able to meet societal needs while reducing overall global consumption. Since GDP growth cannot be fully decoupled from carbon emissions within the necessary timeframe (Parrique et al 2019; Haberl et al 2020), climate targets (IPCC 2022) will remain unattainable if global growth persists. In a post-growth scenario, resources such as land and energy would need to be redistributed to ensure a fairer share for everyone. Hickel and Slameršak (2022) advocate for energy convergence, where High-Income Countries reduce their energy use while ensuring adequate energy access for the rest of the world. This is in line with the Contraction and Convergence strategy proposed by the Global Commons Institute (Meyer 2000), which suggested that each country should reduce its Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions to an equitable per capita level. In the Global South, economic growth would continue, with a focus on redistributing resources until basic needs are met, after which growth would stabilise.

Policies to reduce inequalities

If we accept that redistribution would be good for the environment and society, the question arises as to how it might be done. Despite global commitments to reducing inequality, such as UN Sustainable Development Goal 10, it remains entrenched. Social mobility is limited in many nations (UN 2020), with declining income mobility in the UK since the late 1970s (Social Mobility Commission 2022).

However, inequality is not inevitable; it is shaped by policy and institutional structures and choices (Piketty and Saez 2014). Key drivers include rising returns to capital over labour, regressive taxation, financial deregulation, privatisation, globalisation, and exploitative trade relations (Piketty 2014; Oxfam 2016; Hickel et al 2022). For instance, declining tax progressivity in the US and UK since 1980 (Piketty 2014) and tax competition among nations have concentrated wealth while depriving states of resources needed for social and environmental policies. Additionally, Northern economies continue to extract resources and labour from the South through inequitable trade practices (Hickel et al 2022).

Effective inequality reduction policies must tackle root causes, including capitalism's role in perpetuating disparities. For redistribution to work for the environment, it needs to address both low and high incomes. Solely lifting people from poverty, without limiting the wealth of the rich, risks increasing carbon emissions.

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Hence, we need to raise the income of the poorest and kerb excessive wealth at the top. Kate Raworth's (2017) doughnut model offers a visualisation of this balance: the outer ring represents planetary limits, while the inner ring marks the minimum requirements for human well-being. Similarly, Gough (2023) proposes a sufficiency economy framework, linking human needs with ecological boundaries. Policies to reduce inequality primarily focus on lifting people out of poverty. Effective measures include universal education, stronger labour protections, progressive taxation, and social benefits (UN 2020). A higher minimum wage is also widely seen as a tool to reduce poverty and inequality (Butcher et al 2012), though some studies dispute its impact (Medrano-Adán and Salas-Fumás 2023). Universal Basic Income (UBI) could address inequality by eliminating poverty, though critics warn it might justify cuts to public services (Kleiner 2016). An alternative model, Universal Basic Services (UBS), provides essential public goods such as housing, transport, and healthcare, which may be more environmentally sustainable than UBI (Kopp and Nabernegg 2022).

In relation to excessive wealth, some advocate 'limitarianism' – capping wealth to prevent excessive power concentration and redirecting resources to social and environmental needs (Robeyns 2017). Oxfam (2013) reported that redistributing the wealth of the world's richest 100 people could end extreme poverty four times over. In relation to excessive income, there have been proposals for establishing a maximum income level to reduce excessive consumption (see, for example, Gough 2017; Fuchs et al 2016). Jeremy Corbyn, former leader of the Labour Party in the UK, supported this policy (Guardian 2017).

Wealth and income redistribution strategies include progressive taxes, income caps, reparations, and moral pressure. Progressive taxation requires higher rates for top earners and stricter measures against tax evasion, but global resistance remains (Travers 2024). Some suggest taxing luxury consumption instead, such as Verchere's (2021) proposal to target high-end spending. Others advocate income caps, with Pizzigati (2018) proposing a system where earnings exceeding ten times the minimum wage face a 100% tax.

At the global level, redistribution through climate reparations recognises the colonial roots of the multiple environmental crises (Paul 2021), but financial commitments remain inadequate. Oxfam (2020) found that 80% of climate aid to the Global South consists of loans, not grants. While some nations, such as Scotland, have pledged loss and damage funds (SIDA 2022), broader financial frameworks are lacking.

Moral pressure may also drive wealth redistribution. Public shaming campaigns can discourage excessive consumption (Barros and Wilk 2021). Taking a more positive approach, voluntary giving might be encouraged. This has historical precedents, such as India's Bhoodan movement, which redistributed 1.9 million hectares of land (Sherman 2016). Today, initiatives like the 10% Pledge encourage wealthier individuals to donate a portion of their income (GWWC 2024). Though limited, there is some value in encouraging small-scale, individual actions as part of a strategy of norm diffusion (Katz-Rosene and Pasek 2024).

There can also be greater integration of redistribution with environmental policy (see Bell, 2020), including public investment in low-carbon jobs and cheap or free public transport. It is important to design mechanisms that are seen as fair, transparent, and effective in delivering both environmental and economic justice.

Hence, a comprehensive strategy – combining redistribution, regulation, and public engagement – is essential to reducing inequality. The next section discusses the role of labour organisations in achieving this.

The role of labour organisations in redistribution

Unionisation appears to have a major equalising effect on income distribution within a country, probably because it helps to protect jobs and wages (Bucci 2018; Flavin 2018;

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Farber et al 2021; Becher and Stegmueller 2021). Given this, the decline of organised labour has been posited as a contributing factor to rising inequality (Schlozman et al 2012; Volscho and Kelly 2012; Bartels 2016; Ahlquist 2017; Bucci 2018). There is less inequality in societies where there is higher union membership (Dabla-Norris et al 2015; Dromey 2018; Farber et al 2018), increased union density (Jaumotte and Osorio 2015), greater occurrence of collective bargaining (Piketty et al 2014), and active and passive labour market policies more broadly (Checchi and García-Peñalosa 2008).

Labour unions may restrain inequality through several mechanisms. First, collective bargaining enables unions to secure higher wages for their members (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Rosenfeld 2014). Second, unions enhance political representation by mobilising low- and middle-income voters (Leighley and Nagler 2007; Rosenfeld 2010; Kim 2016; Kerrissey and Schoefer 2018), thereby amplifying the political influence of economically disadvantaged groups (Flavin 2016) who have an interest in reduced inequality. It has also been noted that labour unions can shape the political attitudes of their members and clarify their economic position (Ahlquist and Levi 2013; Iversen and Soskice 2015; Kim and Margalit 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson 2017). For example, unions actively promote anti-inequality attitudes among their members and, in general, increase their members' awareness of social issues (Donnelly 2016; Kim and Margalit 2017; Macdonald, 2019; Lyon 2020; Frymer and Grumbach 2021; Han and Ye 2022).

Studies of support for redistribution that consider union membership as an explanatory variable have found that union members are more likely to support redistribution than other research participants, controlling for income and other socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. Mosimann and Pontusson 2017; Yang and Kwon 2021). Macdonald (2019) notes that, while the United States has become increasingly unequal, 'union members are more aware of, and more concerned about, rising income inequality. Furthermore, in states with higher levels of union membership, the mass public responds to rising inequality by demanding more redistribution' (Macdonald 2019, 1198). Obviously, those who support redistribution are more likely to join unions, so it is complicated to assess the causal direction. We could theorise that there is a reciprocal or reinforcing relationship – people who support equality join unions, but union involvement can also strengthen these beliefs. Countries with greater union membership tend to have higher levels of government redistribution and show larger public support for this than countries with lower union coverage (Allan and Scruggs 2004; Macdonald 2019).

However, since the 1980s, union membership has declined dramatically in many countries (Visser 2023; Colfer 2022). In the United States, union density had declined to less than 10% by 2024 (Brown & Curchin, 2025). This deunionisation means a loss of power. Moreover, it is primarily low-wage workers who have left or failed to join unions – those who would benefit most from redistribution.

The decline of unions reduces the voter turnout among the less affluent (Leighley and Nagler 2007) and also undermines pro-redistributive attitudes, thereby minimising the pressure on government to address rising inequality. Members of unions that primarily organise low-income workers are more likely to support redistributive government policies than members of those unions which predominantly organise high-income workers. Arndt (2018) noted that, in the Scandinavian countries, there has been a growth in membership within white-collar unions and federations at the expense of the traditional blue-collar union federations. They found that these white-collar unions were less supportive of redistribution and prefer market-based allocation of incomes, since their members are the potential 'losers' of redistribution and intervention. Arndt (2018) also noted that solidarity towards low-income members is muted if those on higher incomes are organised in separate federations.

Mosimann and Pontusson (2022), analysing British, German and Swedish survey data, found that those who belong to unions whose members had a broad range of incomes

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tended to be more supportive of redistribution. They, therefore, proposed that the decline of union membership among poorly paid wage-earners makes it less likely that unions will support redistribution policies since their members, relatively better paid, could be losers in redistribution. They state,

> An implication of our analyses is that the salience of redistributive issues for low-income citizens has declined as a result of these developments. Another implication is that changes in the overall composition of union membership have eroded support for redistribution among unionised workers and professionals in the middle and the upper half of the income distribution (Mosimann & Pontusson 2022, 1329).

Han and Ye (2022), after examining 39 countries between 1985 and 2010, similarly argue that the effect of union membership on redistributive attitudes depends on how much particular unions focus on the importance of redistribution and wage solidarity. In some cases, 'unions would prefer less government redistribution because most union members are already better off and would not benefit much from government redistribution' (Han & Ye 2022, 1249).

Unions can play a crucial role in advancing redistribution, particularly if they become more inclusive of lower-income workers. However, as this paper argues, when union members come to understand that redistribution is essential to achieving environmental sustainability, this awareness can help build broader support for redistributive policies across the income spectrum. Many workers are increasingly concerned about the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on their jobs, families, and communities – concerns that can further strengthen the case for a TJT grounded in both social and ecological justice.

Even so, unions in carbon-intensive sectors such as mining and heavy industry face a strategic dilemma: defending jobs in the short term may conflict with long-term ecological goals. This tension is shaped by national context, ownership structures, and organisational culture (Mangang 2024; Keil 2024; Bell 2023). Some unions have adopted a defensive posture, resisting transition policies that threaten employment, while others are engaging proactively in shaping transition plans. Hence, a TJT must include sector-specific pathways that ensure workers are not disproportionately burdened. This includes retraining, social dialogue, public guarantees, and union-led planning of regional transition strategies (see, for example, Lempinen et al 2025).

Overcoming barriers to transformation

Proposals to limit wealth and redistribute resources often face strong opposition from the rich. A common argument is that the wealthy serve as role models, driving hard work and innovation in a meritocratic system. However, much wealth is inherited or built on monopolies, elite connections, and exploitation rather than individual brilliance. Oxfam research (Jacobs 2015) found that 65% of billionaire wealth stems from cronyism, inheritance, or monopolies. Some US politicians have noted 'no one makes a billion dollars. You TAKE a billion dollars' (Kelton 2019), reinforcing the view that extreme wealth is extracted rather than earned.

Opponents also argue that taxing or capping wealth will drive high-skilled individuals abroad, reducing economic resources (McCloskey 2017). However, research (Spangenberg 2014) suggests that mobility is limited due to social and personal ties, and more equal societies may become attractive over time. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2010; 2018) argue, inequality harms entire societies, not just the poor, and beyond a basic level, wealth does little to increase happiness (Easterlin 2010). Evidence suggests that well-being is better

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supported by strong communities, meaningful work, and social cohesion rather than excessive wealth (Jackson 2006; Feeney and Collins 2015).

Linking redistribution to environmentalism has also been hindered by the environmental movement's predominantly middle-class composition (Bell 2020). This has led to a focus on technological and lifestyle solutions rather than systemic issues like power imbalances and resource distribution (Fuchs et al 2016). For example, subsidies for electric cars, funded by taxpayers, often benefit the wealthy while failing to address structural inequalities (Sovacool et al 2019).

There has been substantial academic analysis of whether and how the environmental movement can collaborate with the trade union movement (e.g. Räthzel et al 2021). Kalt (2022) argues that trade unions are neither inherent allies nor opponents of environmentalism, but rather engage strategically with green transitions depending on contextual factors such as organisational identity, governance structures, and public discourse. This strategic variability is further complicated by the fact that union positioning on environmental issues often differs across organisational levels. While national federations may endorse green transition narratives, local branches frequently resist due to immediate concerns over job security (Lempinen et al 2025). These tensions reflect broader structural dilemmas between long-term societal goals and short-term member interests.

Despite the challenges, cooperation between environmental and labour movements is not only possible but increasingly observable in practice. Joint campaigns – such as those advocating for public ownership of energy, green job guarantees, and community-led transition funds – demonstrate the potential for alignment. While ideological and organisational differences remain, shared commitments to justice, economic security, and public investment offer fertile ground for collaboration under a TJT framework.

However, many scholars highlight the difficulty unions face in reorienting their agendas toward environmental concerns (Flanagan and Goods 2022). This paper argues that a focus on redistribution offers a promising avenue through which unions can contribute meaningfully to a TJT – regardless of whether they explicitly prioritise ecological issues. By advocating for improved pay and working conditions, particularly for the lowest-paid workers, unions play a direct role in income and wealth redistribution. If union members increasingly understand redistribution as essential to sustainability, this could help build broader cross-class support for transformative change.

Nonetheless, current JT policies remain limited in scope. They often focus narrowly on retraining and compensating workers, rather than addressing the need for systemic transformation (Bridgen and Schøyen, 2022; Nenning et al 2023). Moreover, as discussed in other work (Bell 2024), most JT initiatives in the Global North fail to consider the global implications of transition. These frameworks rarely acknowledge the disproportionate burdens placed on the South, nor do they incorporate the forms of redistribution – financial, technological, and structural – that a genuinely global TJT would require.

Importantly, despite a general decline in union membership across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, significant exceptions exist. For instance, union density remains above 40% in several countries and reaches over 90% in Iceland, over 80% in Cuba, and between 50% and 70% in the Nordic states (Espinosa 2024). This variation, shaped by geography, sector, and ownership models, demonstrates that higher levels of unionisation are possible – and that unions could play a key role in enabling both environmental and redistributive movements under the banner of a TJT.

It is also important to highlight that a key barrier to reducing inequality and achieving sustainability is capitalism itself, which relies on low wages and unemployment to maximise profits. Laruffa (2024) notes the tendency to avoid discussing the concept of capitalism in relation to eco-social policy. Yet, corporate interests influence government policies, often suppressing environmental action (Gough 2023). Fraser (2022) argues that

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capitalism is the root cause of both inequality and ecological destruction. She proposes coordination of the campaigns of different social movements so as to build an emancipatory counter-hegemonic project that includes 'anti-colonial environmentalism' or 'ecosocialism' (Fraser 2022). Fraser's framework suggests that while anti-capitalist critiques offer useful insights, the focus should be on restructuring political and economic institutions to ensure both redistribution and ecological sustainability within or beyond current capitalist frameworks. Addressing inequality requires challenging capitalism's exploitative structures rather than just its symptoms.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that redistribution is not merely an accessory to, but the foundational logic of, a Transformative Just Transition. Overconsumption by the wealthy, enabled by extreme inequality, is a major driver of ecological breakdown. At the same time, inequality erodes the social cohesion and political will needed for effective environmental action. Inequality is not inevitable – it is a policy choice, and as such, it can be reversed through deliberate political and economic intervention.

Drawing on recent work on union-environment dynamics and redistributive policy (Keil 2024; Ciplet 2025; Lempinen et al 2025), this paper shows that institutional mechanisms – such as redistributive taxation, regulatory reform, international coordination, and collective labour action – are necessary to shift toward socially and ecologically just outcomes. Moral appeals are insufficient when the interests of those in power run counter to both equality and sustainability. What is needed is structural change, rooted in material redistribution and driven by organised political pressure.

In this context, trade unions are indispensable. As collective organisations of workers, unions are uniquely positioned to challenge inequality, raise demands for fair distribution, and help institutionalise economic transformation. While unions have historically faced challenges in integrating environmental concerns, they can lead the push for redistribution, through higher wages, job guarantees, and broader socio-economic reforms, which would indirectly and directly support sustainability goals. As this paper has argued, redistribution itself is inherently green.

To make TJT truly transformative, it must also be global in scope. This includes recognising and addressing the disproportionate burdens borne by the Global South through historical exploitation and environmental degradation. A Global JT Fund, underpinned by climate reparations and international solidarity, is one such proposal that centres justice in the transition. Workers and communities in both the Global North and South must be involved in shaping these frameworks, acknowledging the interconnectedness of their struggles and futures.

Sustainability is unlikely to be achieved without addressing economic inequality, and trade unions play a central role in advancing this agenda, given their ability to organise, advocate, and mobilise. A TJT needs to confront inequality as a structural barrier to both environmental and social progress. If labour and environmental movements align around the principle of redistribution, they may be able to build the political capacity needed to support a more just and sustainable future.

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