

Plastic production, use, disposal and workers' rights

Plastic pollution has reached and impacted the whole world, including the most remote places and communities. While plastic waste has long reached unmanageable levels, plastic production is expected to triple by 2050 in a business-as-usual scenario. Plastic is not only impacting our ocean, it is in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil we grow our food in. Plastic production, use and disposal contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, biodiversity loss and chemical pollution; it also directly impacts the health of people and communities. This short paper zooms in on some of the intersections between plastic production, use and disposal and workers' rights, as a summary of a webinar organised by the [Break Free From Plastic](#) movement.

PLASTIC IMPACTS WORKERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES ALONG ITS "LIFE-CYCLE"

Plastic production, use, disposal, and pollution impact the health, safety, rights and opportunities of workers. Workers are impacted directly, for instance by hazardous chemicals and substances they manipulate or are exposed to during their work, and, at the moment, monitoring of workers for health effects that might result from exposures to chemical or physical agents during work is limited. Workers and their families and communities may also be more impacted indirectly than other parts of the population, as they may live close to the production or waste management facilities, where the pollution (air, soil, and water) may be particularly high. Plastic production, use, disposal and pollution is an environmental, human health and a human and labour rights issue, which often disproportionately affects marginalised and vulnerable communities.

WE NEED TO DESIGN SOLUTIONS THAT PUT PEOPLE, WORKERS AND THE PLANET AT THE CENTRE OF DECISIONS AND SOLUTIONS, AND OVER THE PROFIT

Growing calls to reduce plastic production, mainstream zero waste and reuse solutions, and reinvent distribution models understandably raise concerns of workers in respective sectors regarding their employment. It is essential that these concerns are acknowledged, workers' rights protected and that we collectively anticipate a transition towards new models in a socially just way, benefiting both workers and the environment. The tendency to emphasise technological fixes over people and over systemic change must be a thing of the past and workers must have a seat at the negotiating tables and be at the centre of a just transition that prioritises their wellbeing, job security and conditions, health and safety, and social protection.

RIGHT FOR COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND ROLE OF WORKERS' UNIONS

Unions defend and represent the rights of the workers that they represent, regardless of their sector of activity. Unions are in general well aware whether the type of job is considered more or less environmentally friendly. That is why most unions engage in environmental and climate efforts demanding for a just transition. The unions believe it is the companies' duty to avoid pollution (prevention and 'polluter pays' principles) whilst it is the union's duty to fight for social justice through a just transition. Sometimes it is a challenge that the members of the unions themselves lack capacity to meaningfully engage in these issues.

CHALLENGES THAT WE MUST LOOK OUT FOR SO THAT THEY DON'T HINDER A SOCIALLY JUST TRANSITION


Preventing negative impacts on workers

Jobs are not equal in terms of working conditions and wages in different sectors related to plastic. As an example, the wage of a worker in a recycling plant would on average be significantly lower than the wage of a worker with similar skills in a production (chemical, plastic) plant (e.g. in Belgium, the difference can be as high as 10€/hour). To allow for a truly just transition, it is essential to ensure working conditions and wages are improved in the sector and that workers have the right and opportunity to effectively re-skill (retrain for a new job) and up-skill (acquire new competencies) across or beyond the plastics value chain.

It is essential to consider the potential implications on working conditions and liability as new zero waste or reuse models are established, for example as the delivery sector transitions to reusable packaging. At the moment, in a delivery sector (with self-employed workers), if a customer was to be unsatisfied with the reusable packaging item (e.g. item is dented, not cleaned appropriately), the liability lies with the worker delivering the food, as do the financial consequences. This could have very important consequences on workers, especially in the period where the new distribution models are set up and consumers get used to being delivered food in reusable packaging. It is important to consider how the time for collection and return of reusable packaging would be paid to the workers, to ensure that the transition to reusable packaging does not drive a decrease in their income.

Ensuring the full and effective participation of workers in designing the transition

The recognition of waste pickers in Global Plastics Treaty negotiations is an important victory for the global labour movement. In order to arrive at an effective treaty that covers plastic pollution over the full life-cycle, all workers along this "life-cycle" of plastic should be involved in this process, as well as in other policy processes. Workers need to be part of the conversations in creating solutions and policy discourse must focus on all types of jobs equally and not marginalise certain types of jobs such as those in the recycling sector. Obtaining workers engagement through formal processes of soc-



ial dialogue, as established by the International Labour Organization, can guarantee broad civil society support for the measures that are needed to deal with plastic pollution. This is why their effective participation should be supported, notably through financial support, translation and interpretation as needed, and providing appropriate speaking opportunities.


Workers' organising and bargaining, as well as practices reducing waste can be undermined by the corporate ownership models notably in the retail sector. For example, some UK supermarkets are subject to finance-driven restructuring, which can imply regressive trends such as loss of fresh-food counters, and hence loss of jobs and increase of ready-to-go single-use packaging models. Corporate shareholders and directors are primarily the ones empowered by these corporate models. Workers need to be directly involved in the development of new models.


Funding the transition

To allow for just transition to actually happen, financing is needed. Financing is a question of social justice, and the financial responsibility should be put on a variety of actors: first and foremost the companies, responsible for the current climate and pollution crisis. A better understanding of (multinational) companies' financial mechanisms and taxation would be beneficial for workers and all, notably when looking at how the transition should be financed. Public finance also has a role to play in the transition, notably in supporting training programmes and infrastructure developments.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN TRADE UNIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Workers and trade unions are engaged with issues around plastic waste as part of wider climate and environmental agendas. Some unions have dedicated 'green reps' who engage with workers and management on climate and environmental issues, whilst in other unions this work may be taken up by health and safety reps. However, many unions are under pressure from the challenges of defending basic rights at work. This can limit the capacity of unions to develop research and industrial campaigns and strategies around climate and environmental issues. There is great potential for partnership working between environmental NGOs/groups and unions on these issues (and many good examples of this). Developing partnerships between environmental organisations and trade unions requires trust which must be built up over time. Identification of mutual benefits is an important part of this, but workers also need to be confident that the outcomes of any such projects will protect workers' rights and jobs.





Please note that in this summary, we focused on all workers in the plastics supply chain and the role of trade unions. We will publish a separate paper focused on the role of informal workers. This summary collates key messages shared by speakers at Break Free From Plastic Europe's Intersectionality Forum on Plastic and Workers' Rights, whom we thank for their contributions, namely:

Bert De Wel, Climate Policy Officer, International Trade Union Confederation

Benjamin Crawford, Researcher, Institute of Employment Rights with School of Law and Social Justice at University of Liverpool

Funda Ustek-Spilda, Senior Researcher and Project Manager, Fairwork and Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

Guéric Bosmans, Advisor on Just Transition, Algemene Centrale ABVV

Ludovic Voet, Confederal Secretary, European Trade Union Confederation

Additional resources

[Fairwork Pledge](#)

[Report by CIEL: Plastic & Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet](#)

[IPEN / UNEP report on concerns of health impacts of the circular economy](#)