

Climate Justice, Climate Jobs: what struggles do we need to win and how?

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Workshop: Ending fossil fuels and renewable energy – what would a workers’ plan for energy look like?

The role of the construction workforce in reducing energy consumption and producing energy

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Problems with the construction sector

The construction industry has a vitally important role to play in reducing carbon emissions and energy consumption, constructing the infrastructure needed for renewables, and retrofitting the housing stock, especially as the built environment accounts for 40% of end use emissions. Yet it is a sector beset with problems, not least low levels of unionisation in much of the private sector apart from engineering construction. Over half the workforce is classified as ‘self-employed’ for tax purposes, most firms (c. 97%) are SMEs - many of which are micro firms, the subcontracting chain can be very extensive, including labour-only subcontracting, and there are massive ‘skill’ shortages.

The fragmented nature of the industry means that it lacks a training infrastructure, which goes a long way to explaining why apprentice numbers are so low and the majority of young people seeking to train for a career in a construction industry, whether as a carpenter, plumber, electrician, etc., are to be found on full-time courses in FE colleges, though they can then have problems obtaining the necessary work experience. Ironically, given this weak work-based training infrastructure, combined with underfunding and lack of recognition of the key role of FE colleges, this is also a sector in which the labour process has become more and more complex and abstract, requiring significant knowledge, know-how, and competence of the workforce, and ever higher qualification levels. This is especially the case with low energy carbon construction, where knowledge of, for instance, air tightness and thermal bridging is needed, as well as knowing how, for instance, to install solar/photovoltaic systems and heat pumps, whether air or ground source, not to mention insulation, and having competences in, for instance, communication and integrated teamworking.

How to retrofit: the role of DLOs

The urgency to meet emissions targets and tackle fuel poverty means that retrofitting the housing stock needs to be on a large-scale, whilst also ensuring good employment and working conditions and valuing, training, and developing the workforce to carry this out. It is here that the local authority building departments or direct labour organisations (DLOs), representing one of the key areas of construction where unionisation has remained strong, can play a key roleⁱ. The DLOs date back to 1890, when the London County Council was set up, in which the Progressives played a significant role, campaigning against the corrupt use of contractors and for municipal socialism, whilst at the same time the Housing of the Working Classes Act was passed making way for the first council housingⁱⁱ. DLOs subsequently played a major role in building, refurbishing, and repairing council housing and training and employing the workforce needed for this, especially in the 1890s, after the two world wars, and then on into the 1970s, when they also opened up to employing many women as well as those from BAME groups. Under Thatcher their activities were seriously curtailed, especially new building, though many continue to operate to this day, even expanding as local authorities insource work.

The DLOs, therefore, operating on a non-for-profit basis, politically accountable, unionised, inclusive, offering secure, employment and good working conditions, and providing monitored work experience for trainees, are an obvious way to carry out large-scale retrofitting. They could begin with fuel poverty council estates and, following the setting up of local Retrofit Taskforces, work in collaboration with FE Colleges, unions, local and environmental groups, etc.

Engineering construction and the NAECI

The other area of the construction industry that is unionised is engineering construction, which covers power stations (including nuclear) and similar constructions and comes under the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry, known as NAECIⁱⁱⁱ. NAECI is one of the few remaining collective agreements in UK, is a centralised agreement, stipulating good employment and working condition, limits to the subcontract chain and overtime, and including such aspects as integrated teamworking. It is a key reason why the notion of just transition and nuclear energy itself often pose dilemmas for unions, including at Hinkley Point, which is covered by a variant of NAECI and where EDF offers many training opportunities and encourages the employment of women.

The advantages of NAECI, an agreement that should be extended to the whole industry, need to be weighed against the disadvantages of large nuclear projects, including Hinkley, Sizewell, and Sellafield. These depend for their construction on a mobile workforce, many living away from home for long stretches of time as ‘travellers’. The projects kill the surrounding area and threaten communities as other industries are reluctant to locate themselves nearby. And, they are eventually decommissioned, so cease to generate energy though continuing to operate, as in the case of Sellafield, which employs about 8,000 workers under NAECI and is left to treat nuclear waste, including from Sizewell.

The construction workforce and renewables

With large scale retrofit and renewable energy and district heating programmes, much less travelling is involved, and the workforce required is thus more locally based, as with DLOs. These can be coordinated by the Retrofit Taskforces and offer good employment and working conditions and comprehensive training programmes according to agreed occupational standards, so countering the insecurity of employment in the private sector and the often-hazardous working conditions to which construction workers are subjected.

ⁱ Direct Labour Collective (1978), *Building with Direct Labour: local authority building and the crisis in the construction industry*, Housing Workshop of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE)

ⁱⁱ Clarke L., (2014) ‘Building by Direct Labour: the significance of Direct Labour Organisations in the provision of public housing in the UK 1890-1980’ in eds., Campbell, J, Andrews, W, et.al *Proceedings of the first Construction History Society Conference*, Construction History Society.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clarke L and Fitzgerald I. (2020) ‘The changing nature of labour regulation: the distinctiveness of the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI)’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 51/1-2, March, 58-74