

Green jobs and a just transition for women workers?

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Will green jobs restructuring entrench gendered labour market inequalities? The global financial crisis provided a pretext for significant transfers of public monies into 'green jobs' programs around the world. Unions and social justice agencies are insisting that such developments adhere to 'just transition' principles, that is, ensuring a socially equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of labour market restructuring as societies attempt to become ecologically sustainable. Much of this discussion has focused on anticipated geographical and industry impacts with relatively little attention being paid to the potential gendered, cultural or class-based consequences. However, international studies are beginning to raise issues, for example, about the prospects of women workers being excluded from green collar employment 'because of continuing occupational segregation along gender lines' (Bird et al 2009: 7). This paper takes up the gender question by exploring the impacts and implications of employment strategies aimed at climate change mitigation and adaptation for women workers, and what they might mean for the likely success of such strategies. It does so through survey and interview findings from a case study of nursing and allied health professions.

Many nations used the global financial crisis as an opportunity to direct public stimulus funds towards green jobs programs (Masterman-Smith 2010). Whether they are advancing the principles of a just transition has come under increasing scrutiny (Capello and Harcourt 2009; Kennet 2009). Obama's *Green New Deal* has been criticized by feminist scholars and activists for its gender blindness, for example. One objection is that most green jobs initiatives, particularly the better paid, have occurred in male dominated industries such as engineering, construction, plumbing, manufacturing, forestry and agriculture. Green jobs in female dominated industries are comparatively rare and appear to reproduce the inferior wages and conditions that women generally experience. Because women workers tend to cause less environmental harm through their workplaces, partly as a result of gendered divisions of labour, their experiences of a greening economy is often an afterthought, with male-dominated high polluting industries taking precedence.

Trade unions and social justice agencies in many nations have long fought for a just transition to sustainable societies for workers and communities, particularly those most vulnerable to, and least responsible for, environmental degradation - the poor, cultural minorities and women (Di Chiro 1998; Faber 1998; Bullard and Johnson 2005; ILO 2007; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; ACTU 2008). They have been concerned to ensure that the major restructuring expected to be involved in transitioning to a low-carbon economy does not provide a pretext for the erosion of wages and working conditions generally. Just transition principles include support for the greening of existing jobs and, where workers lose their jobs on environmental grounds, the provision of good-quality green employment opportunities (UNEP 2008). Environmental rights at work are also an essential component of the just transition framework, including protection from environmental harm or discrimination, and the right to participate in decision-making on environmental matters in the workplace. If the case for a just transition is to be advanced, there is a need for further research into the industrial impacts of green workplace initiatives on employees, and the nature of their engagement with them.

While there is no systematic data available on green employment in Australia, the healthcare sector provides a useful case study of how gendered divisions of labour and the industrial landscape of women's work affects the opportunities and difficulties that they face in contributing to, and benefiting from, the green economy. A Victorian Government interviewee estimated that 60% of

its energy use is attributable to the healthcare sector. Waste generation, transport emissions and procurement policies are also prominent environmental issues for the sector (Krisberg 2008; Castledine 2009). Further, healthcare sector employment has been one of the largest contributors to employment growth since the mid 1980s, with Australia's ageing population ensuring the continuation of this trend (Rafferty and Yu 2009). Attention to greening this sector is also important on other grounds. It is well understood that healthcare workers, especially nurses, are amongst the most trusted and respected professions in the community. The influence of these professionals as change agents is central to health promotion and social change strategies. Hence, there are social, environmental and economic dividends to be gained from this large, respected and community-engaged workforce modeling sustainable workplace practice.

In 2009-10 interviews with over 60 healthcare sector stakeholders were conducted on the issue of sustainable nursing and allied healthcare, from an education and skills perspective.¹ While this study confirmed that employee participation and ownership of workplace greening initiatives, alongside managerial support, are essential to their success, much of these effort towards greening healthcare has been aimed at administrators, managers and building supervisors; roles in which men predominate (Krisberg 2007). The place of nurses, allied health workers and other employees at the coalface of service delivery and patient care in such initiatives is less than clear.

Nonetheless, healthcare workers face very real environmental challenges (McMichael, Woodruff and Hales 2006; Blashki 2009). The impacts of climate change (for example disease patterns, emergency response, mental health and food security) on an already stretched health system, particularly given the added pressures of an ageing population and workforce shortages, are expected to be dire. For example, interviewees explained that the permanent relocation of aged care patients away from bushfire prone areas drives the relocation of healthcare jobs. Others discussed how water shortages in rural hospitals affect the kinds of treatment that can be offered, such as dialysis services, and therefore the type and quantity of work available. Further, there has been very little attention to how job design, skill needs and industrial conditions like work intensification and casualisation might be addressed to enable workers to genuinely engage in the transition to sustainable healthcare. Interview and survey data from healthcare academics – another female dominated sector – about the sorts of knowledge, skills and principles healthcare graduates would need to respond to these challenges, revealed similar inattention to the professional development needs and industrial circumstances of educators. Notwithstanding these difficulties, green shoots in sustainable healthcare learning and practice are discernible. Similar to Rafferty and Yu's (2009) findings in mostly male dominated industries, the blossoming of green work practices is hindered by a paucity of research and a lack of regulatory and legislative leadership, coordination and certainty, including labour law.

Though little research exists on the implications of greening the economy on workers' rights and conditions, Mattera and others caution that there are no guarantees that green jobs are good jobs (2009; also Beard 2009). Indeed, many green jobs are substandard and women workers and other disadvantaged groups tend to be concentrated in them (Masterman-Smith 2010). Given the economic, political and social pressures that climate change is bringing to bear, robust labour law that reflects the realities of both a carbon-constrained and socially unequal world, is needed if a just transition for all workers is to be realised.

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