

Migrant workers and the Just Energy Transition in Spain

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Abstract

Drawing on preliminary research for my MSCA project and theoretical insights on capital this presentation will reflect on the main question of this workshop: what are the opportunities and challenges for a just energy transition for workers?

A focus on migrant workers in Spain

Outline

- Context of the relationship between labour migration and energy decarbonisation in Spain
- Academic views of Just Transition
- Capital main features – potential implications for migrant workers? Insights from Spain
- Conclusion

Context: a rapid energy decarbonisation in Spain?

- Following the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, the Spanish Integrated National Plan for Energy and Climate plans:
 - a 32 % reduction in GHG emissions by 2030;
 - doubling renewable energy use (48% of the total energy use);
 - 81% of renewable energy in electricity generation;
 - a 50% reduction in energy dependency
- Key changes: the closure of 12 coal-fired power plants and the (planned) multiplication of solar and wind energy projects.

Migrant workers in the development of the offshore wind industry in Spain

- 2021: Fishermen in the Cantabric sea write and sign the Burela manifesto against the offshore wind farms projected by the government Plans for the Zoning of the Maritime Space (POEMs)
- 2023: Young migrants living in Spain trained to work in the wind industry (Basque Country-GazteOn programme).
- 2024: Migrant workers hired in the Global South for wind turbine factories in the Cadiz Bay (Andalucia) and Ferrol (Galicia)
- 2025: Galician entrepreneurs of the metal industry demand more flexibility to hire foreign workers due to a lack of staff for the metal industry (wielders, boilermaking, electromechanics).

Burela (Galicia)

- A small town where the fishing sector represents 25% of its income
- 40 percent of the employees in the fishing sector are foreign workers
- More than 50 nationalities (Senegal, Cape Verde, Indonesians, Peru, Morocco, Colombia)

A growing academic interest in Just Transitions

- Origin of JT: 1980s: Tony Mazzochi from the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) union -> workers protected from or compensated by environmental policies affecting them (Sweeney and Treat, 2018)
- Popularisation of JT in policy and academic spheres (Sweeney and Treat, 2018).
- Different focuses on the analysis of JT: labor; energy, climate and environmental justice; socio-technical transition; governance strategy; public perception (Healy and Barry, 2017; Heffron and MacCauley, 2018; Stevis and Felli, 2015, 2020; Wang and Lo, 2022).
- Different political orientations – some closer to the status quo than others (Kreinin, 2020; Stevis and Felli, 2015; Wilgosh et al., 2022)

«Exploring the political» in Just Transitions

- Who loses, who wins, how and **why** (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013:133).
- Procedural justice -> how decisions are taken; who defines what is just; who participates in decision-making (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013),
- Distributive justice -> who loses land and who struggles to either protect it or to have greater access to the rents extracted (Healy and Barry, 2017; Newell and Mulvaney, 2013).

Theorising injustice in energy decarbonisation through a focus on capital

- Capital as a major driver of the energy transition, and particularly renewables (Baker, 2022; Christophers, 2024; Huber, 2025; Luke and Huber, 2022) - in Spain too
 - **What can we learn from capital that is useful for reflecting on potential migrant workers' experiences of energy decarbonisation in Spain?**

Two key questions

- What are the conditions of existence and survival of capital of energy decarbonisation in Spain?



- How can such conditions allow us to think of what migrants may experience as a result of capital leading energy decarbonisation in wind energy production?

The reserve army of labour

- A surplus labouring population is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis – primitive accumulation and dependence on money to survive (Marx, 1867)
- The metal structures for wind towers or windcatchers are being made in two areas long by unemployment due to the decline of the shipyard industry:
- Cádiz (Andalusia), the Spanish province with highest unemployment rates
- Ferrol (Galicia) - depopulation rates grew exponentially from the 80s up to present as a result of the fall of the shipyard industry -> there are no employees for the metal industry (welding, boilermaking...)

Sacrifice zones through enclosures and spatial transformations

- Ecological Transition Ministry's Plans for the Zoning of Maritime Space (POEMs)
 - > installation of approximately 285 wind turbines in the coasts of Galicia, Asturias and the Basque country.
 - > more than 230-metres high
 - > many of which only 12 metres from the coastline
 - > expected impacts on fish capture and biodiversity

Migrant workers from the Global South as reserve army of labour

- “Capital in the wealthy centers is able to take advantage of lower-wage labor abroad either through capital migration to low-wage countries or through the migration of low-wage labor into rich countries.” (Foster and Cheney, 2011).
- Accumulation by dispossession reinforces the reserve army of labour and capital accumulation in Spain (Cross, 2013).
- The income deflation imposed on the working people in the periphery through colonialism and neoliberalisation -> increase in global migration: from 84 million in 1975 million to 215 million in 2010. The main flows were in a South-North direction (82 million) (Delgado-Wise, 2013).

Labour exploitation and surplus value

- Labour exploitation rooted in the extraction of surplus value: the valorisation of the unpaid time and effort that workers spend producing commodities for the capitalist (Marx, 1867:242-267)
- For workers this may materialise in long working days with unpredictability about its length (also known as absolute surplus value).

Labour exploitation and surplus value

- Ferrol: The first period, 11 hours a day, 5.5 days -> interviewed migrant workers are also doing six-day shifts.
- Cadiz: 12-hour-shifts in the midst of a heat wave -> migrant workers employed there
- Bilbao: Haizea Wind employees working more than 12-hour shifts and 20 days without rest (ELA, 2019).
- Ferrol: wages inferior to the amounts stipulated by the collective bargaining agreement (Interview with worker at Nervión factory, April 2023).

Disposability of labour-power

- Waged workers can only sell their labour-power if there is someone interested in buying their commodity.
- When capital no longer finds enough profitability in the purchase of labour-power in a given context, this exchange between capitalists' and workers' labour-power stops
- As production shifts to places where the costs of labour-power are significantly lower (mostly countries in the Global South) (Amin, 2018).
- Galicia: closure of wind turbine factories (Viveiro, 2021-Vestas; Carballiño and Pornteareas, 2023 – 530 employees - Ganomagoga-> Vestas; As Somozas, 2021 – 2000 workers - Siemens-Gamesa).

- What future for migrants in the wind industry if sales decline or capital moves?
- What future for migrant workers employed in the fishing industry in Burela if offshore wind farms affect the fisheries sector there?

Some reflections

- Migrant labour organisation needed -> unionisation? Synergies with migrant organisation?
- Fragmented struggles around ED -> protests confined to sectors, workplaces, locations and specific aspects of the energy transition.
- Dialogues between different fragments of the working class are needed.
- The speed of the energy transition fosters reactivity, rather than class strategy and class recomposition -> implications for unions' strategy to support migrant workers

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THANK YOU!