

Unresolved tensions in green transitions: Retraining and the question of ‘how’?

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–5

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20438206221129207

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg**Jesse Adams Stein** 

University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This commentary responds to Chantel Carr’s article ‘Repair and care’ through a focus on the vexed question of carbon-intensive worker retraining in the context of urgent and necessary decarbonisation and industry change in Australia. There are many parallels between my research and Carr’s, particularly in relation to an understanding of the potential of *existing* technical skillsets in industrial working populations. Like Carr, I reflect upon my empirical research – over the past decade – with current and former industrial tradespeople. This commentary reflects on what ‘retraining’ has actually meant, in practice, for industrial workers in deindustrialising Australia. I then identify a key tension that exists in relation to the question of retraining carbon workers. Climate change mitigation calls for the dramatic and wide-ranging transformation of industries, infrastructure, jobs, and skillsets. But the fact remains, humans are complex, with diverse needs, and they are now more likely to articulate these needs on an individual level, not collectively. With this in mind – and in a background in which much academic work draws attention to *complexities* and institutional shortcomings – how do we balance individualised requirements with the need for dramatic, macro-level transformation?

Keywords

Climate change, decarbonisation, just transitions, retraining, technical skill, work

Introduction

In this commentary, I take up one element of Chantel Carr’s call for a ‘deeply pragmatic and inclusive environmental politics and scholarship’ (2022: 1) by focusing on the vexed and often highly simplified concept of worker *retraining* in the Australian context. Specifically, I engage with retraining as it emerges in the context of carbon-intensive workers’ potential employment shifts within a low- or post-carbon economy (generated through versions of *just transitions* or a *Green New Deal*). Carr states:

re-training and re-skilling are cited as a panacea for socially just transitions, requiring carbon-intensive regions to redirect their working populations to more ‘in-demand’ knowledge-based skills. The risk in taking this path prematurely is in overlooking work practices and dispositions that may already have much to offer (2022: 4)

Corresponding author:

Jesse Adams Stein, Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building,
University of Technology Sydney, Broadway, NSW 2007,
Australia.Email: Jesse.Stein@uts.edu.au

I concur with this statement; workers must be able to access a variety of forms of training so as to be brought along – not left behind – in the decarbonisation process. Importantly, the onus should not be on individuals alone to ‘save themselves’ amid this mess. But the tensions between corporate interests, risk-averse politics, worker organising, informal community organising, and those choosing to act independently, has made green job transitions a live-wire issue in Australia.

Carr rightly notes that many interpretations of green industry transitions tend to ignore *existing* technical knowledge, skillsets, capacities and networks that may in fact be incredibly valuable in the challenging times ahead (2022). Much of my own empirical work has led me to similar conclusions about the diverse range and applicability of existing technical skills, well beyond original workplace applications. As Carr has argued elsewhere (2017), and as I have witnessed in my own research (Stein, 2016, 2021), industrial workers bring their skills, technical and social knowledge, material literacies, and spatial understandings with them beyond the workplace, and they use these capacities in their homes and communities. For example, research participants have spoken to me of having particular *ways of seeing*, that is, technically informed ways of interpreting the world around them: be it spatially, geometrically, in terms of materials, machinery, or production methods, and in terms of maintenance and repairability. These practical orientations will come to be vital in a world that is simultaneously reconfiguring and falling apart.

Political and mediatised engagements with the question of worker ‘retraining’ have historically tended to oversimplify the matter of moving from one workplace or profession to another. Too often, workers are imagined to be isolated and movable pawns, without established ties to family, community, and place. Discussions of this sort often occur without heed for Australian housing (un)affordability, and without planning for other logistical and place-based factors. Indeed, it has been argued that in some contexts the techno-managerial language of *just transitions* may serve to replicate rather than break down neoliberalised structures of worker exploitation, individualisation, and precarity

(Bouzarovski, 2022), an insidious pattern we must recognise and guard against. Others have argued that the most effective strategy in relation to ‘greening work’ requires a coherent *combination* of approaches, including policy change, environmental labour law, a jobs guarantee, meaningful worker representation, and plant conversion, alongside vocational guidance and retraining; in other words, a multi-pronged approach (Bohnenberger, 2022). It is clear we cannot plan worker retraining in an isolated state, separate from other factors.

Empirical reflections: Manufacturing workers face retraining

Engaging closely with Carr’s work has also led me to reflect on the past 11 years of my own fieldwork and interviews with current and former manufacturing workers, tradespeople, technicians, and makers. My research has charted another industrial transition: Australian economic restructuring in the 1980s and the loss of trade protections, which led to the long-term contraction of Australian manufacturing. Since 2011, I have conducted oral history interviews (a ‘life history’ form of interviewing) with workers from the Australian printing industry (Stein, 2016), from steel and plastics sectors (Stein, 2021), as well as with tradespeople and makers who have shifted between industrial trades, vocational education and the creative industries (current project).

Oral history has been subject to decades of debate and analysis, which I will not dwell on here (but see Thomson, 2007). For the purposes of this commentary, however, it is important to note that because oral history interviews tend to take a biographical form, there is the capacity to go into temporal depth about life transitions, stage by stage. This allows for an extended dialogue that engages with *how* these participants navigated educational and occupational challenges over time, how they moved between roles, and how they made decisions in the context of declining industrial sectors and precarious work. That is what I want to emphasise here: the *how* of transition.

How does a worker move from one employment sector to another? How do they actually retrain, in

practice? How might this reshape their sense of self, their gender identity, and their class position? How do people make decisions to move regions? How might this balance with other family members' occupational and educational obligations? Workers must decide whether they can afford to pay for university, TAFE, or private courses, and then – which one to choose? The cost of retraining competes with other expenses: childcare, healthcare, housing, etc. These processes of change are made much more challenging for those without means, without structural advantage, and without direct government funding or union support. Such decisions now occur amid deteriorating social and physical infrastructure, and in the context of regular climate-related weather disasters, particularly in Australia.

As Carr notes, carbon workers are 'largely men in regional areas' (2022: 5). Accordingly, one key question becomes: how might dominant constructions of Australian masculinity hamper or prevent green transition agendas, given the highly masculinised environment of much Australian heavy industry? The link between skilled industrial labour and hegemonic masculinity runs deep, and this presents a genuine dilemma for men who have spent their formative years understanding their identities as being almost exclusively tied to industries such as coal or forestry (Waling, 2019; Connell, 1995). In other words, resistance to change is not merely a question of jobs or inconvenience, it is core to workers' gendered identities.

Reflecting on my own research on the Australian printing industry, the compositors and letterpress press operators I interviewed (about their experience of automation in printing in the 1970s and 1980s) were retrained. They re-learned to type on QWERTY keyboards, and to use computerised typesetters and lithographic presses, but they did so largely *with* union and government support (Stein, 2016). To be fair, my research focused on a government-run enterprise (the NSW Government Printing Office), not a Murdoch newspaper, so this example is less cut-throat than other printing histories, but the story is still one of transition and retraining. Although many print workers did not relish the shift, they were taken through this process as a collective. It was only after 1989, with the abrupt

closure of the NSW Government Printing Office, that the print-workers' stories diverged and became far more isolated.¹

The more recent manufacturing stories I uncover are very much individualised pathways – where workers speak of 'jumping ship before it's too late', with many undertaking self-funded retraining in the form of night courses (while working during the day). The perennial juggle of searching for work, supporting family, finding affordable housing, and developing further education is extremely wearing. Many spoke to me of the anxiety of short-term contracts, and of recent years spent where their annual household income was under \$40,000AUD (while undertaking study). For many families, this is the reality of 'retraining'.

Macro-transitions and individualised needs: An unresolved problem

All this leads me to draw attention to an unresolved, broader problem percolating alongside the specific issue of worker retraining. There is an underlying contradiction between the individual complexities of workers' lives, and the need for ambitious, state-led programs of industrial transformation and labour redistribution. This is an issue that presents a challenge for academics (such as myself), who sometimes write about the need to appreciate *complexities*, while at the same time calling on policymakers to institute large-scale state-led programs (rather than relying on the market or technological solutionism for climate change mitigation). How can we achieve this fine-grained sensitivity to labour complexity, while also swiftly changing industrial gears on an enormous scale? Or is it too late, must we now be ruthless, and do whatever it takes?

I do not have the answer to this, but I do know that it helps to pay heed to what we already have: an industrial workforce.² Carr encourages us to think broadly about what skill entails and to remember existing technical capacities amid the calls for change (2022). What might this disposition mean in practical terms? It may mean listening to technicians, shop floor workers, or maintenance crew for advice, rather than making decisions purely at a

managerial level. It may mean taking heed of ‘on-the-ground’ experience and observation, not just software programs. It might mean contributing to an inclusive politics of environmental reform, one that does not blame individualised consumption or workers themselves, but lays the responsibility for climate action at the feet of the corporations and owners of capital that are responsible for the vast majority of global carbon emissions (Huber, 2019, 2022). It may also mean a societal shift at the level of wartime restructuring, one that generates a broad social consensus that change must occur (Flanagan, 2017). Crucial to a fair transition process is the development of much higher levels of worker representation in workplace decision-making, in the process of transforming plants, changing products and processes, and reskilling. In this way, workers’ existing knowledge and skills can be brought more cohesively into the process. Realistically, this is far more likely to occur in contexts where there is a high level of worker democracy (Bohnenberger, 2022).³

This tension – between the complexity of human needs, and the urgent need for macro-scale change – is at the heart of democracy’s dilemma in the context of climate change. We have seen how market-led endeavours to shift towards ‘green economies’ are beset by problems, chiefly because it is profits, not the environment, which become the end goal. We have also seen how an environmental politics that focuses on individual consumption – on carbon footprints and middle-class green virtue signalling – can be divisive and push the working class away from joining the cause (Huber, 2019). The climate situation is now so desperate that the state *must* take a much larger and more interventionist role in decarbonisation, and it must push those responsible for the majority of emissions – fossil fuel corporations – to pay for the change. But to do this effectively the state must also bring along with it the voices of workers, their knowledge, skills, and existing commitment to sustaining their communities. And for the ‘impractical’ academics among us (myself included), it is imperative that we reflect upon the ways in which our calls for more ‘complexity’ might unwittingly serve to slow down what now needs to be a rapid global transition.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Australian Research Council (Discovery Early Career Researcher Award 2021, DE210100158).

ORCID iD

Jesse Adams Stein  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7031-9728>

Notes

1. The NSW Government Printing Office was closed in 1989, with 4 weeks’ notice. It was one of a string of closures and privatisations of government-run industries and organisations in this period, an outcome of former NSW premier Nick Greiner’s neoliberal program of austerity and asset sell-offs.
2. Although it is worth nothing that with current low rates of technical education, we will likely *not* have the same diverse technical skillsets in the working population in 20–30 years’ time. But for now, we still do.
3. This is a problem for Australia, which has comparatively low union density, of around 14.3% of workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020).

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) Trade union membership. Online: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/trade-union-membership/latest-release>.
- Bohnenberger K (2022) Greening work: Labor market policies for the environment. *Empirica* 49(2): 347–368.
- Bouzarovski S (2022) Just transitions: A political ecology critique. *Antipode* 54(4): 1003–1020.
- Carr C (2017) Maintenance and repair beyond the perimeter of the plant: Linking industrial labour and the home. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42(4): 642–654.
- Carr C (2022) Repair and care: Locating the work of climate crisis. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. (preprint). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221088381>.

-
- Connell RW (1995) *Masculinities*. Sydney & Oxford: Allen & Unwin.
- Flanagan F (2017) A consensus for care: Reframing the future of work. *Griffith Review* 56: 33–41.
- Huber M (2019) Ecological politics for the working class. *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy* 3(1): 7–45.
- Huber M (2022) *Climate Change as Class War*. New York: Verso.
- Stein JA (2016) *Hot metal: Material Culture & Tangible Labour*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Stein JA (2021) *Industrial Craft in Australia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer.
- Thomson A (2007) Four paradigm transformations in oral history. *The Oral History Review* 34(1): 49–70.
- Waling A (2019) *White Masculinity in Contemporary Australia*. London: Routledge.