



Attitudes of Coal Workers Towards the Just Transition

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Introduction

- In 2009 COSATU congress adopted resolutions that recognised climate change as one of the greatest threats to both the planet and people.
- The transition to greener sources of energy has focused on coal mines and the overreliance on coal to produce electricity.
- Trade unions in the country's Mineral Energy Complex are key to achieving a just transition
- Trade unions represent workers interests in coal mines, NEDLAC, and the PCC.
- In 2025, the country's four federations - COSATU, FEDUSA, NACTU, and FEDUSA – jointly launched the Just Transition Labour Centre
- What do unions say about “Just” Transition?



FEDERATIONS' JUST TRANSITION POLICIES

COSATU

- A concept that aims to address how a transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy can occur in a manner that is fair, just, and inclusive economy
- Transition cannot take place without workers and people at its centre.
- most workers in the coal value chain are semi-skilled and do not have any qualifications after matric, job losses are a significant challenge as they may struggle to find alternative employment.

Opportunity for deeper transformation that includes the redistribution of power and resources towards a more just and equitable social order

Workers, small businesses, and communities will be most vulnerable to the effects of the transition

An unplanned energy transition therefore poses significant socio-economic risks for workers in the coal value chain, as well as the economies of Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

The gendered division of labour in the mining sector, and the role of women in mining-affected communities is not often acknowledged as an issue within the mining sector.

Economic diversification and regional economic development of coal towns is vital in planning for the survival of workers, small businesses, and communities who will be affected by mine and power plant closure

FEDUSA

Climate action is a trade union issue. We have a vital role to play to protect jobs in existing workplaces and industries by demanding industrial transformation, to organize new quality jobs in the emerging green economy and to fight for the Just Transition measures that ensure we leave no one behind.”

- Jacques Hugo, Vice President, 2021

1. Mining Opportunities:

- providing the metals and minerals needed to construct and manufacture the technologies.

2. Energy Mix:

- extension of the lifespan of coal mines, coal-fired electricity plants and Sasol's coal-to-liquids plants.

3. Active Labour Market Policies:

- The transition must be managed so that no-one is left behind. This will require active labour market policies and social protection measures

Aspect	Examples
Job and training placement schemes	Data bases of available jobs and learning opportunities and of work seekers
	Job and training placement centres, which consolidate advertised opportunities and help workers apply
Retraining for jobs in growing industries	Training for industries that are growing or could expand, for instance formal agriculture and food processing, construction, transport, work in renewable energy, recycling, healthcare
Income support during transition	- Unemployment insurance - Social grants - Comprehensive social security net to be created
	Retrenchment packages (minimum required under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act is one week per year of services; formal employers often give two)
Support for established and potential small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs)	Incubators and extension services
	Financing and grants
	Assistance in identifying opportunities and developing business plans
Transition out of labour force	Early retirement and voluntary retrenchment packages
Social protection measures for the long-term unemployed	- Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) - Social grants - Public works schemes (like the Extended Public Works Programme)

Our Just Transition (SAFTU)

1. A discussion on just transition should not be separated from the debate on the imperative of development.
2. This struggle for a transition to a low-carbon, sustainable future is far more important to be outsourced to the private sector, or governments.
3. Protect distinct groups of workers.
4. Act alongside other social movements.
5. Use Just Transition in terms of a profound socioeconomic transformation.
6. **SAFTU REJECTS ESKOM BREAKUP: BACKDOOR PRIVATISATION, SECRET DEALS, AND THE BETRAYAL OF THE POOR (October 2025, Statement on Behalf of GS Z. Vavi)**



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SAFTU

- **“We—the climate movement and the trade union movement—can no longer afford to endorse the central premises of the so-called liberal business establishment, of the mainstream, “big green” NGOs, and of market-focused think tanks. We must challenge to current arrangements of power, ownership and profit”.**

- Zwelinzima Vavi, General Secretary, at Just Transition to the School of Labour and Urban Studies (1 October, 2025)

Coal Mineworkers' Unions

"South Africa is going to lose jobs in the coal sector but not gain them in renewables. We are not going to be dictated to. You [in the West] are wasting your time. We are a country that must do things at our own pace. The unions are calling for more time to provide workers and communities most directly impacted by potential job losses to deliberate and set in place a viable, just alternative. - General Secretary William Mabapa



NATIONAL UNION OF MINEWORKERS

- Active in defending coal by supporting the expansion of coal mining, protesting job losses from mine closures, and promoting 'cleaner coal' technologies.
- NUM officials have supported the expansion of coal mining.
- Opposed the closure of old coal-fired power stations on the grounds that they ***“can be rebuilt to extend their lives”***. - (NUM President, 19.6.2019)
- The impression the western money behind the transition further fuels uncertainty and concerns about the motives of those pushing the agenda

NUM National Congress 2022

Concerns of workers and the source of their apprehension:

1. Immediate Cease of Coal Use
2. Loss of Livelihood
3. Direct Job Losses
4. Can a Just Transition in the energy space be achieved without jobs losses?
5. Is there a future for coal given the climate concerns on one hand and its existence in abundance and being a source of livelihood more than 200K?
6. What is the appropriate pace of the energy transition that will make it just?
7. Should South Africa aim to achieve zero emissions or net-zero emissions?

NUMSA

- Most invested and innovative of COSATU affiliates when it came to issues of the impact of climate change on workers and the working class.
- Particularly on issues of the production and ownership of energy sources, namely, renewable energy.
- As early as 2018 the labour movement that had championed the transition to low-carbon energy was fighting the government's efforts.
- Then Dep Gen. Secretary, Karl Cloete, in an op-ed in the Daily Maverick in March 2018 reiterated that they **remained committed to a socialist vision of renewable energy, not a capitalist vision.**

NUMSA Press statement , 21 May 2024



“When it was not fashionable to defend Eskom, NUMSA has been very consistent that what we need is a just transition which must be about making sure that we retain existing jobs and we must embark on an aggressive campaign to create the much-needed jobs.

We have maintained that as a sovereign country we must have a right to decide on what energy mix is suitable to reliably power our economy and to electrify our communities.

That is why we rejected, with the contempt it deserved, a foreign agenda to dictate to South Africa that it must dump coal.

This being done by the West ... when their base load in the North is on coal, gas and nuclear.



We know we must shift from coal-fired power plants!

AMCU

AMCU

- We agree with several other trade unions that have expressed concern with government's policy towards addressing climate change through its privatised renewable energy programme.
- We demand that government ensures a just transition to a wage-led low carbon economy.
- industrialisation plan, which ensures that we produce the renewable energy inputs in SA and through labour intensive methods of production

Most members work in the fossil fuel sectors, namely, mining and construction.

In eMalahleni, members have to use water polluted by heavy metals and acid mine drainage, breathe in air does not meet even SA's very low clean air obligations.

Workers must play central role in shaping just energy transition.

AMCU rejects Seriti's reasons for planned retrenchment of 1,100 workers (October, 2024)

AMCU rejects Seriti's reasons for planned retrenchment of 1,100 workers (03 October 2024)

“South Africa contributes less than 2% of CO₂ [carbon dioxide] emissions and then China is sitting at about 35% of CO₂ emissions. US [United States] is sitting at about 13.5%. But those people are not closing down, India is not closing down, Russia is not closing down. You with your lousy 1.2%, what effect would you make in the world in terms of addressing climate change?”

- AMCU president, Joseph Mathunjwa,

SUMMARY OF WORKERS' CONCERNS

Study / Report	Coal Worker Voices	Trade Union Actions	Key Insights
LRS: Coal Workers Face an Uncertain Future	Fear of job loss, lack of information, concerns about retraining	Advocacy for inclusion in planning, demand for decent work guarantees	Workers feel excluded; unions push for social dialogue
TIPS: Just Transition in Coal	Workers concerned about economic alternatives	Unions involved in policy design, skills development, and community support	Emphasizes need for coordinated planning and retraining
UCalgary: Participatory Research in Mpumalanga	Workers express distrust of government-led transition	Unions call for participatory governance and local investment	Highlights tensions between climate goals and livelihoods
ITUC Case Studies	Workers demand security and retraining	Unions negotiate national Just Transition agreements	Successful union-led models exist globally
World Bank: Social Foundations of Coal Transition	Workers fear economic collapse in coal towns	Unions advocate for trust-building and inclusive governance	Long-term planning and community engagement are essential
IEA: Accelerating Just Transitions	Only 14% of coal workers covered by JT policies	Unions push for income support, retraining, early retirement	Highlights global gaps in worker protections
UT Austin: Global JT Case Studies	Workers skeptical of renewable job promises	Unions navigate political and economic complexities	Comparative insights into union strategies across contexts

Role of Unions in Just Transition Policy

- **NEDLAC**
- **PCC**
- **Declining Influence JETP and JET-IP Agreements**
- **Abandonment of Centralised Collective Bargaining in Coal Mines**

Key Take Aways

- 1. All federations and trade unions acknowledge climate change is real and global warming has impacted SA.**
- 2. All federations and unions demand JUST transition.**
- 3. Just Transition should not be separated from the debate on the imperative of development**
- 4. The mining industry can be part of the low-carbon transition. (Expansion of Lifespan)**
- 5. Public Ownership of the New Energy System and Socially-Owned Renewable Industry.**
- 6. Declining Capacity to Influence Government Decisions**

Unions Committed to Just Transition



TRADE & INDUSTRIAL
POLICY STRATEGIES (TIPS)

**OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE TIPS
JUST TRANSITION LABOUR CENTRE**

14 MAY 2025

WELCOME

