
■ Peter Bartelheimer, Silke Ötsch
Industrial conversion –
a frame for eco-social production politics

■ Symposium
Transformation at the point of production
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■ Could industrial conversion help to overcome transformation barriers?

Real existing transformation

- Transition in mobility, agriculture, building, energy sector, industry is being delayed
Infrastructure is dilapidated or missing
- Financial gap for transition expenses
- (Politically created) social-environment-dilemma
- Political rollback

Real existing policies:

- Responsibility diffusion
- Policies address markets, market players and consumers. Employees have little influence

Conversion as an alternative?

- Co-designing the transformation empowers actors
- Problems require collective intelligence / intuition
- Collective decision-making means more compliance
- Favorable framework conditions: Pressure for change; more political will for framing policies?

■ Adapting to planetary boundaries – »supply side« barriers, delays, lock-ins

■ Politics of production

- Insufficient levels of ambition in government regulation
- Excessive confidence in »green growth« and technological fixes
- Investment in fossil-based sectors exceeds fossil-free expenditure by four
- Counter-transformational political rollback

■ Politics in production

- Regulatory targets for investments not sufficiently clear, reward delays
- Socio-technical transition to carbon free production is managed top-down
- Contradicting union responses to »jobs versus environment«
- Unsustainable products shape professional identities (e.g. »automotive way of life«)
- Workers' social position tied to present jobs – transition bears threat of social decline

■ Conversion frames industrial transition as part of ecosocial transformation

■ History has left its marks:

- Labour's arms conversion initiatives of 1980's influence our understanding of the term

■ Conversion ...

- implies a targeted process
 - Transition is politically induced, emphasis on agency as against anonymous market forces
- calls for industrial democracy
 - Addresses workers as subjects of (instead of subject to) transition
 - Applies democratic norms to means of production – »industrial citizenship« (Marshall)
- questions product designs and use of resources
 - Includes responsibility for impacts of production in workers' claims to »decent« work
- is a probable cause for alliances of workers and social movements
 - Potential impact of external activism in industrial conflict

■ Conversion strategies extend beyond company level

■ Conversion links resistance to shutdowns and layoffs to larger movements

- Iconic struggles, historically: Lucas Aerospace Corporate Plan 1976 – Greater London Council from 1981 / German union working groups Alternative Production 1980s – peace and ecology movements
- Today: ex-GKN (Campi Bisenzio) / Bosch (München Berg am Laim) – climate activism

■ Sustainable production requires systemic change beyond company level

- From electric car engines to alternative mobility provisioning (»transport turn«)
- Phase-out of lignite power plants requires regional restructuring
- Changes in workforce places new demands on employment services (re-training)
- Climate finance tools needed to redirect investments
- Regulatory framework for raw materials (circular economy, urban mining, supply chains)
- Rethinking the German export-oriented business model

■ A widening arena for industrial conflict

■ Collective bargaining, »social dialogue« on products, production facilities, business plans – the German case

- Consensus-oriented tradition of social partnership
- Strong role of work councils, shop steward bodies extends to production transition
- Metal industry contract on „future collective agreements“ at company level (since 2021)
- Entitlements to public employment services for re-training linked to (company-wide) collective agreements

■ New roles for unionism

- »Competitive corporatism« or »social movement« unionism (Webster et al 2008)
- Unions as actors in regional restructuring – from economic to societal power resources?

■ Elements of »ecosocial production politics«

■ »Production politics« (Burawoy 1985) is more than state politics

- Links politics *in* and *of* production
- Production includes (welfare) services and infrastructures

■ Areas for transformational demands and initiatives towards »ecosocial production politics«

- Workers' control over transition to zero-carbon production
- Individual (vs. firm-based) entitlement to retraining and income supports in case of labour market transitions
- Support for labour environmentalism on the shopfloor and in communities
- Regional infrastructure for sustainable consumption, alternative provisioning systems to create demand for alternative production
 - Demand side climate mitigation, IPCC 2022

■ Strategic discussions / power resources

- **Scope and character of the transformation:** E.g. e-mobility or mobility transition? A bit more participation or socialization of industrial sectors? Tension between speed and acceptance/participation.
- **Relationship between direct and representative democracy:** How do bottom-up decisions by grassroots democracy relate to top-down decisions by representative democracy? What bias does civil society have from a democratic perspective?
- **Are conversion strategies based on a realistic idea of the subject?** How do neoliberally socialized subjects act in the crisis? Is the subject open to democratic, social and ecological change and prepared to enter into conflicts for this? Which emancipation strategies are appropriate?
- **Which programs and which demands should be prioritized?** PiP, PoP, questions of justice...? Coordination / provisioning via markets, the state, PPRs, commons, dialogue, solidary relationships, etc.?

■ Forthcoming (Autumn 2024): Yearbook "Economy and Society" 2024, ***Konversion: Eine Strategie in der sozialökologischen Transformation***

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More: <http://www.oekonomie-und-gesellschaft.de/>

■ Thank you for your attention! Discussion.

More at ...

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■ Yearbook Economy and Society

- <http://www.oekonomie-und-gesellschaft.de/>