

## ILLAWARRA CLIMATE JUSTICE ALLIANCE— JUST TRANSITIONS WORKING GROUP

### *Precarity and Possibility*

*The answer to everything is in Country, right ... Country the way I describe it is ... it's the place... it's the people ... it's the culture ... it's the journey ... and it's the inter-relationship with these things ... Jade Kennedy*

The struggle for climate justice has been the largest movement the Illawarra region has seen since the anti-war movement of the early 2000s. From March 2019 through to the summer, protests in Wollongong grew in numbers, confidence and militancy. The key demand of the 2019 climate strike in the Illawarra was “No Mining in the Water Catchment”—a demand that cuts directly to tensions surrounding a just transition in this region and elsewhere.

The Illawarra has been known for its coal mining and steel production. Important struggles waged by workers and communities of the coal and steel industries have contributed significantly to the radical culture of the city and region. We continue to learn from these struggles. At the same time, these industries are a key nexus of the contradiction and antagonisms of the climate crisis—ongoing destruction of Country, extraction, exploitation.

In a historical sense, the idea of a Just Transition has referred to social and economic measures taken to move fossil fuel workers and their communities from conventional to sustainable production. More recently, just transitions have been included in plans and policies for Green New Deal proposals. In 2020, the Australian Greens repackaged existing policies as a Green New Deal; the Australian Institute of Company Directors found that three-quarters of directors wanted a bosses’ Green New Deal of “large-scale public investment in renewable energy and greening the economy” and a “more radical policy agenda on industrial relations reform to increase labour market flexibility”; and the Liberal National coalition government in New South Wales instituted and funded a green energy policy. In the Illawarra, 2020 has seen prospects for hydrogen production, manufacture of hydrogen vehicles, wind turbine production and green jobs sitting alongside coal mines seeking to expand their operations.

Contradictions and fears for future capital accumulation are pushing some aspects of green investment, sections of capital and business are calling for greener economies and the State is already playing various roles in this process. The Illawarra Climate Justice Alliance’s Just Transitions Working Group has sought to develop an approach to just transitions that is anti-capitalist and decolonial. We have sought to develop a conception of a just transition “that combines the social forces of the region that can contribute to this process,” beginning from the material practices of resistance and transition that already exist.

We can't expect the rule of profit in a green capitalism to be less violent and destructive than it is for fossil capital. It is useful to pay attention and understand these developments in green capital as they are important, but they won't be the basis of a social transformation to a mode of living that isn't at violent odds with the metabolism of the Earth and the ecosystems of which we are a part. For that we need other ways of seeing, doing, producing.

Comparisons and analogies between the pandemic and the climate crisis have become commonplace. In 2020, the Illawarra had one of the earliest clusters of COVID cases in New South Wales, as well as being home to disembarked passengers from the cruise ship *Ruby Princess*. The grassroots response by everyday people and preparation by the health sector was timely. Many started "staying home and saving lives" while simultaneously establishing both organised and informal mutual aid responses before the closure of schools, public facilities and businesses was made mandatory. The health sector's preparations were planned and implemented by clinical staff, often based on information received directly from their colleagues in Italy, Spain, Great Britain and New York rather than through conventional hierarchical health administration systems. Though at times preparations caused worry and hardship for health workers, patients and their loved ones, they were immediate, inclusive and effective. Some days after passengers disembarked from the *Ruby Princess* in Sydney, the cruise ship was berthed in Port Kembla Harbour with all her crew aboard. The response of the local community, who immediately advocated and organised for the wellbeing of the people still on the *Ruby Princess*, is emblematic of the Illawarra response to the pandemic.

People in the Illawarra have also experienced increased precarity due to casualisation, unemployment, ongoing hardship from a punishing welfare system, a steep reduction in affordable housing in the region, and in the case of overseas students both loss of income and disruptions to their studies. For some, precarity is an everyday experience of the imminent threat or the lived reality of homelessness and hunger. The pandemic has made life more precarious for many people in the Illawarra, but the precarity created by this pandemic can't easily be separated from the intensification of existing pressures—the same pressures that are addressed by an anti-capitalist, decolonial approach to a just transition.

A just transition calls for the imagining of radical possibilities that approach the climate crisis in terms of reducing the production of greenhouse gases and caring for Country and one another. Listening to and learning from the knowledges embedded within the Aboriginal custodianship of Country, we imagine a just transition which involves practical measures of decolonisation, building relationships of care and solidarity, and orienting to the everyday concerns of those at the forefront of the climate, environmental, and extinction crises.

The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has made it clear that we must rapidly and radically transform development, work, the economy, and life in general. Humanity's survival hinges on the preservation and extension of relationships that nurture the biosphere and create healthier environments, focused equally on humans and the nonhuman world in a dynamic of interdependence and care.

This transformation will include the closure and rehabilitation of coal mines and the elimination of hazardous industrial emissions. It will entail new types of work, new skills, and new technologies. To transform how and why things are produced, we need to construct forms of community control over social development and completely restructure,

retool, and decarbonise production, exchange, and consumption. This transition process should involve shorter work hours, and living incomes for everyone, guaranteeing a better quality of life for all, whilst living within the limits of the Earth's ecosystems. A genuinely just transition will require a rapid redistribution of wealth and power, moving away from environmentally destructive industries, away from damaging jobs, towards socially useful work that sustains life and livelihoods.

Just as every aspect of our ecosystems is interconnected, the struggle for climate and environmental justice intersects with every struggle for social and economic justice. Across the globe a diversity of organisations and movements are challenging the priorities of political, economic, and social elites. Collectively acting in the interests of the vast majority, we are building our own power, whilst also holding political institutions, corporations, and governments to account, putting pressure on them by using a range of tactics and strategies. The transformation of society we require involves developing our own strength, increasing people's ability to organise their own lives, sweeping aside the economic, political, and institutional obstacles in our way, as we create a just transition to a better world.

#### WORKS CITED

- Australian Greens. "We Need a Green New Deal." <https://greens.org.au/campaigns/green-new-deal>
- Karp, Paul. "Australian Company Directors Call for More Infrastructure Spending and a Green New Deal." *Guardian*, October 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/oct/22/australian-company-directors-call-for-more-infrastructure-spending-and-a-green-new-deal>
- Kennedy, Jade. "A Conversation." *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder*. The MECO Network, Open Humanities Press, October 2019. [http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/The-MECO-Network\\_2019\\_100-Atmospheres.pdf](http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/The-MECO-Network_2019_100-Atmospheres.pdf)
- Southall, Nick. *Care is the Cure: Love, Solidarity & the Virus Crisis*. <https://revoltsnow.wordpress.com/2020/06/02/care-is-the-cure-love-solidarity-the-virus-crisis/>