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Article (Published)
(Refereed)

Original Citation:

This version is available at: http://epub.wu.ac.at/6266/
Available in ePubWU: April 2018

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To cite this article: Michael Soder, Kathrin Niedermoser & Hendrik Theine (2018) Beyond growth: new alliances for socio-ecological transformation in Austria, Globalizations, 15:4, 520-535, DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2018.1454680

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2018.1454680
Beyond growth: new alliances for socio-ecological transformation in Austria

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Trade unions and environmental movements are often seen as political opponents most prominently discussed in the form of the ‘jobs vs. environment dilemma’. Based on historical examples of the conflict relations between trade unions and environmental groups in the Austrian energy sector, this paper showcases how the relationship between the two groups has changed from enmity to first attempts at alliance building. Drawing from analysis of union documents and problem-centred interviews conducted with Austrian unionists, it shows that newly emerging alliances between unions and environmental movements contain the seeds for a broad societal movement that can help overcome the paradigm of growth and actively engage in the creation of policies that support a social–ecological transformation.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Trade unions; environment; environmental movements; energy sector; economic growth; job vs. environment; Austria; socio-ecological transformation

\textbf{Introduction}

Indeed, the secret of success lies rather in the measure in which the groups are able to represent – by including in their own – the interests of others than themselves. To achieve this inclusion, they will, in effect, often have to adapt their own interests to those of the wider groups which they aspire to lead. (Polanyi, 1934, p. 188)

Over the last decades, the relationship between unions and environmental movements has been mostly characterized by conflict and controversy. Bound to a growth-oriented development model based on fossil fuels in order to secure jobs (Altvater, 2005; Antal, 2014; Marterbauer, 2011), trade unions have seemingly perceived environmental movements as too narrowly focused in their political goals on particular fields of action (e.g. environmental protection, biodiversity, etc.) without incorporating social and economic considerations into their agendas. Although this perception of environmental movements by unions ignores the wide variety of fields where environmental movements actively engage in social and economic issues (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007), it can explain the existing reservations unions have against environmental groups and their political goals. Further, unions often render environmental problems potentially harmful to their main political interest – employment and income distribution (Felli, 2014; Galgoczi, 2014; Hrynyszyn & Ross, 2011; Savage & Soron, 2011; Walk & Brunnengräber, 2000). However, a systemic transformation...
of the economic system towards sustainability necessitates strong alliances that drive the process of reconstruction. Trade unions as powerful actors in the political system and as important representatives of worker’s interests have to be included in this process of transformation, especially, as they play an important role in the creation of collective consciousness and values, and as they are recognized as key actors in respect to shaping and influencing the societal recognition and awareness of problems (Brand & Pawloff, 2014).

The neo-liberal shift in the politico-economic environment over the last decades has diminished the bargaining and associational power of unions as collective organizations (Hyman, 2005; Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010; Schmalz & Dörre, 2014) and generally increased the influence of short-term interests in society, e.g. profit maximization. This has led to a situation where unions often retract their activities from broader societal questions (Jakopovich, 2009). This can also be observed in the Austrian context, where trade unions actively took a political stance against Austria’s environmental movements and broader environmental and societal considerations (Gottweis, 1997; Leisch, 2009; Natter, 1987). However, there seems to be a slow process of rapprochement between Austria’s unions and broader environmental questions in the last years, but it is a process that is not undisputed within the unions.

The reasons for such disputes were already researched in the field of ‘environmental labour studies’ developed by Räthzel and Uzzell (2011, 2012a, 2012b). In their research, the authors identify four different discourses (technological fix, social transformation, mutual interest, and social movement) within international trade unions in relation to ecological questions. These discourses highlight the process of contestation between various approaches to handle strategic responses to environmental problems. In addition to this general overview about environmental discourses within unions, further important contributions, so far, focus on specific case studies. For instance, Snell and Fairbrother (2010) analyse the Australian context and highlight examples of trade unions’ engagement in environmental policies, and also illustrate obstacles to active trade unions involvement. Barca (2012) gives an overview of the relationship between labour and environment in a historical perspective, focusing on experiences in Italy and the US. Sweeney (2014) shows that parts of the labour movement are already engaging in a ‘new discourse’, which attempts to harmonize the conflicting relations between union goals and environmental concerns. The ongoing discourses and emerging cases can be considered as examples of an opening up of trade unions towards environmental questions, perhaps pointing to the possibility of slowly overcoming former conflicts. In the long run, they can also pave the way for new emerging societal alliances and partnerships between labour and environmental movements (Jakopovich, 2009; Krüger, 2000, 2002; Mason & Morter, 1998; Snell, Fairbrother, & Hart, 2009) that provide benefits for both partners. Krüger (2002) argues that a key motive on both sides is the creation of a greater public acceptance through sustained alliances. With respect to ecological questions, environmental organizations can significantly improve trade unions’ knowledge on environmental issues through formal and informal cooperation. Additionally, they can benefit from the long-standing history of trade unions as political actors, their high assertiveness within the political process and their representative functions in the political system (Krüger, 2002; Snell & Fairbrother, 2010).

In-depth research on these issues is nevertheless limited. In particular, we see little engagement with the role and importance of conflicts created by differences in political goals and political approaches, as well as the impact of these differences on the process of alliance building. Additionally, the Austrian context is sparsely explored, although Austria’s political system, characterized by a special situation of consensus building between employer- and employee interest organizations (Tálos, 2015; Tálos & Kittel, 1995) and historical conflicts between environmental movements
and unions, offers an interesting case that enables an in-depth analysis of trade union attitudes regarding environmental questions and environmental movements.

Based on the analysis of interviews conducted with leading unionists in Austria as part of the research project TRAFO-Labour¹ (see “Research Design and Methods” section), this paper aims to contribute to the aforementioned debates by analysing the Austrian context. Starting with a general analysis of the relationship of Austrian trade unions to ecological questions (see “The Labour Movement and the Environmental Question in Austria” section), this paper proceeds with an analysis of the changing attitudes of unions regarding environmental questions and environmental movements in the Austrian energy sector. Based on the developments in this sector (see “Austria’s Energy Sector” section), this paper shows that conflicting relations among ecological concerns, environmental movements, and trade unions can have long-lasting consequences on how unions address environmental problems politically. It also explores the developments that paved the way to dissolve the political tensions between environmental and union movements in Austria and it elaborates on what are the most important obstacles to cooperation between them (see “Discussion” section). Finally, this paper discusses how a change in this relationship can potentially contribute to political alliances that fulfil the requirements of a socially just and ecologically sound reconstructing of our economic system (see “Conclusion” section).

Research design and methods

To explore the changing relationship between Austrian unions and environmental movements, we followed a qualitative research design consisting of document analysis and semi-structured interviews with Austrian unionists. The analysis of important union documents (e.g. basic programmes, press statements, position papers) allowed us to exemplify the change in positions and arguments brought forward by Austrian unions in respect to environmental concerns. Based on the document analysis, we proceeded with 13 problem-centred interviews (Witzel, 2000). In the work at hand, we provide an in-depth analysis of the reasons, effects, and future potentials of these changes in respect to the development of social–ecological policies fostered by Austrian unions. In order to find our interview partners, we began by following a snowball sampling approach and our interview partners were purposefully chosen (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). All of our interview partners were active in different union organizations, which allowed us to capture different perspectives existing in Austrian trade unions. A list of documents covered and participating interviewees is provided in Appendices A and B.

In the following section, we start with a brief introduction to the Austrian system of industrial relations. A description of the two important conflicts that occurred between Austrian environmental movements and unions in the Austrian energy sector follows, after which we elaborate on the ongoing changes in respect to the relation between Austrian unions and environmental movements over the last decades.

The labour movement and the environmental question in Austria

The system of extensive cooperation between employer- and employee interest groups in the form of the Austrian social partnership has a strong influence on Austria’s political system. With its focus on societal development through compromise and its strong institutionalized form, the Austrian social partnership is also recognized as a strong form of corporatism in the international context (Crouch, 1996; Siaroff, 1999; Talos & Kittel, 2001). As part of the Austrian social partnership system, trade
unions have considerable political power and opportunities to influence and co-shape political and legislative processes through this institutionalized form of consensus building (Tálos, 2015; Tálos & Kittel, 1995). Although neo-liberal policies have weakened the Austrian social partnership over the last few years, the partnership is still of substantial importance as its focus on societal consensus is deeply institutionalized within Austrian politics (Tálos & Kittel, 2001; Tálos, 2015). Since Austria’s trade unions take such a central position within Austria’s political system, a substantial political reorientation towards an increased appreciation of environmental questions has to include trade unions and their members’ interests prominently.

However, historically the position of the labour movement towards ecological questions has been conflictive and characterized by discontinuities and disruptions. In the recent past, the conflicts over the power plants in Hainburg and Zwentendorf in particular have had a deep impact on the relationship of Austrian trade unions towards ecological issues.

In November 1969, the Austrian government planned to build a nuclear power station in Zwentendorf, Lower Austria. After the construction of the power plant and a continuously growing scepticism about the safety of nuclear energy among the Austrian population, the growing protests against the Zwentendorf plant, and the subsequent public debate about nuclear energy, the government decided to hold a plebiscite about its activation. Once the polls closed, 50.47% of voters had voted against its activation. Despite the tight majority that voted for the closure of the plant, the Austrian government implemented the Austrian ‘Atomsperrgesetz’. This law completely banned the production of nuclear energy in Austria. The law has become an integral part of Austria’s understanding of environmental protection (Gottweis, 1997; Leisch, 2009).

In December 1984, environmental activists protested against the construction of a hydropower plant south of Vienna by occupying the planned building site. In 1996 as a result of the protests, the Hainburger Au, a natural fluvial topography, was declared part of the nature conservation area ‘National Park Donau-Auen’. Nowadays, the occupation is recognized as one of the most important political events in Austria after 1945. It heavily influenced democratic processes and the design of environmental policies in Austria and it led to the foundation of the political party ‘Die Grünen’ (The Greens) (Natter, 1987).

In both cases, Austrian trade unions, in favour of economic considerations and together with energy producers, came into conflict with environmental movements and took action against them. These conflicts are considered as traumatic events by Austria’s trade unions, which will be discussed in more detail and in context of the changing relationship between unions and environmental movements in the following section.

Nevertheless, around the new millennium, we find increasing efforts of Austria’s trade unions to build political alliances with environmental movements (e.g. ‘Umwelt&Bauen’, ‘Wege aus der Krise’) and their general positioning in environmental questions.

A glance into the current positions and decisions of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund, ÖGB) and individual sectoral trade unions shows that environmental problems in general and climate change in particular are being identified as problems to varying degrees and discussed from different perspectives. Thus the Austrian Trade Union Federation policy programme talks about the necessity of an ‘ecologisation of all spheres of life’ (Austrian Trade Union Federation, 2013, p. 105, own translation). The Union of Private Sector Employees, Graphics and Journalists (GPA-DjP, 2015) states the objective of ‘a socially acceptable and ecologically compatible economic development’ (GPA-DjP, 2015, p. 151, our translation); the Union of Production Workers (PRO-GE) mentions – next to social justice and peace – a ‘healthy environment’ (Union of Production Workers, 2013, p. 6, own translation) to be a pillar of a pluralistic society, in
which employees have a special status. The Union for Construction & Wood (GBH) explicitly states sustainability as a socio-political objective (GBH, 2014, p. 3); the Transport and Service Union (VIDA) addresses climate change as one of the ‘greatest global threats to humanity and nature’ (VIDA, 2010, p. 23, own translation). In most cases, the trade unions thereby take up problem areas arising from the current ecological crisis for trade union practice. The fields of transport and energy supply, thermal refurbishment measures, and also further reaching political demands on international trade policies or the effects of globalization are of central importance. Furthermore, at the ÖGB Congress 2013 a comprehensive concept for an ‘ecological fiscal reform’ was adopted (Austrian Trade Union Federation, 2013, p. 106, our translation).

However, and despite the rapprochement between Austrian trade unions and environmental movements, tensions between them still exist. In the following section, the developments within the Austrian energy sector serve to exemplify how the conflicts rooted in a form of ‘jobs vs. environment’ dilemma have shaped the relationship among Austrian trade unions, ecological issues, and environmental movements over the last few decades. Furthermore, this example provides the basis for our argumentation, showing how environmental questions have become part of union goals and how the neo-liberal turn in the politico-economic environment as well as an increasing awareness about ecological questions has contributed to paving the way for new forms of cooperation between unions and environmentalists. The example also allows for an elaboration of the boundaries of such forms of cooperation.

**Austria’s energy sector: workers’ interests among structural change, neo-liberal policies, and environmental necessities**

The modern relationship between Austrian environmentalists and trade unions has been characterized by controversy and conflict over the last decades. These conflicts have mostly materialized in a ‘jobs vs. environment’ dilemma (Goodstein, 1999; Jakopovich, 2009; Räthzel & Uzzell, 2011), and they were most prevalent in the Austrian energy sector. For instance, the two historical examples of Hainburg and Zwentendorf, where trade unions actively took political action in favour of securing jobs and against environmental concerns, have significantly shaped the relationship between environmental movements and Austrian trade unions. From a union perspective and up to until now, both cases are regarded as severe political losses. Further, these conflicts and the tensions that arose between environmental questions and union goals led to a situation where Austrian trade unions almost completely retreated from environmental issues in the subsequent years. One leading union representative of the Austrian trade union federation describes the historical context and the relation between environmental movements and the Austrian unions as follows:

So … Zwentendorf and Hainburg. You can picture both cases as wrestling matches. We got a K.O. twice and Muhammad Ali does not climb into the ring again. But nowadays we are back again … this is the ÖGB back again after 20 years of more or less a K.O. … after two severe political defeats, we are now back again into environmental issues … (Interview #1)

Another representative from the union of production workers emphasizes the distance between the Austrian unions and environmental issues as a result of these conflicts.

... the historical burden between Austrian unions and environmental movements … originated in Hainburg and so on … that is a really tiresome subject, which led to a great political distance between them and this distance has characterized the relationship between them over many years. (Interview #3)
Nevertheless, these statements also indicate that the relationship between environmental movements and Austria’s unions has changed recently and Austrian trade unions are again taking part in the discussions surrounding environmental problems and their solutions. There is a chance that they are taking up the conflict again, but the general evaluation of environmental questions has also gained new importance within the Austrian unions. These changes are often described as part of an organizational and personnel learning process, as environmental concerns have gained importance in political and public debates. It can be assumed that ongoing research on climate change and increasing public awareness and interest in environmental problems promoted through environmental movements have been important drivers for this change. A unionist of the Union of Salaried Private Sector Employees and of Printers, Journalists and Paper Workers (GPA-djp) exemplifies this process as follows:

It seems to me that we have already – at least partly – overcome the conflict between us and the environmental movements. In my opinion this is a very, very positive development. That this happened… that strongly depends on individual unionists in important positions. The responsible individuals changed. This is a generational issue. Well, there still are individuals in the unions who have this fear concerning environmental questions. It is the Zwentendorf and Hainburg generation. (Interview #4)

Another unionist from VIDA describes the organizational learning process as a long-lasting process which, at least partly, necessitated a generational change within the organization.

You do not have to make the same mistake twice. This time you can deal with these issues a bit more rationally. But it takes time for such experiences [Hainburg and Zwentendorf] to permeate such a large organization. It takes time for these experiences to trickle down from the top to the works councils to the local level or vice versa. For some questions this process of trickling down can take up to 10 or 12 years until we have changed from political enmity to political support. (Interview #3)

The process of overcoming former tensions and differences has not only taken place thanks to the development of a common understanding of environmental concerns as a relevant field for political action. The conflict around Hainburg and Zwentendorf itself started a process of recognition and acknowledgement of environmental considerations and research into the positioning of Austria’s unions. Further, it has also been the result of the weakened political capacities of trade unions caused by a general neo-liberal turn in the politico-economic framework, which is highly visible in the Austrian energy sector. As a consequence of European energy policies that have favoured an extension of the market logic within national energy systems, Austria’s energy sector has witnessed substantial changes in the last few decades (Flecker, 2014; Flecker & Hermann, 2011; Hermann & Pond, 2012). This can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when the first reform packages targeting the electricity sector were established at EU level, followed by amendments in 2003. The proposed aims of such liberalization processes were to introduce and/or foster competition in order to stimulate innovation, alongside improvements in emissions abatement and price reductions (Halmer & Hauenschild, 2014; Hofbauer, 2006; Jamasb & Pollitt, 2005; Karan & Kazdagli, 2011; Pollitt, 2009; Serrallés, 2006). Additionally, these processes of liberalization resulted in an unequal development of energy prices between industry and households (E-Control, 2014a, 2014b; Kawagoe, 2003; Schneider, Simons, & Orischnig, 2015), a subsequently rising share of households facing energy poverty (Angelo & Herzele, 2013), and an unequal distribution of adaption costs at the expense of households (Chamber of Labor, 2012, 2013). Further, the grand scheme of liberalization also negatively affected employment relations within the Austrian energy sector. Since the 1990s a reduction in employment between 20% and 30% took place, which also led to declining union membership (Atzmüller & Hermann, 2005; Flecker & Hermann, 2011; Hermann & Pond, 2012; Jefferys et al., 2009).
Since the process of liberalization started, more and more companies tried to avoid the collective agreements in the energy sector by shifting employment through outsourcing jobs into sectors with lower standards in the collective agreements. A typical case is the outsourcing of the cleaning service (which used to be under the terms of the electricity collective agreement) to separate companies which fall under a different collective agreement. As a result, collective agreements with inferior contracts could be applied to employees affected by this practice. Further, renewable energy producers often try to avoid negotiations of collective agreements. In sum, these developments caused by political efforts on the national and European level to establish and extend the influence of market mechanisms in the energy system have had a significant impact on Austrian trade unions and their political capacities. Collective interests have been slowly displaced by profit-motives, the role and influence of unions as successful negotiators have been weakened, and the influence of workers’ councils on company decision making reduced (Hermann & Pond, 2012; Hermann, Lindner, & Papouschek, 2009; Madlener & Jochem, 2001; Schneider et al., 2015).

This context coupled with an increasing awareness of the importance of a substantial structural change towards renewable energies within the unions has led to them finally realizing the need to overcome the tensions between their organizations and environmental movements. They have also increasingly recognized the need to build strong alliances with other progressive forces in society to counteract the neo-liberal shift in general, particularly in energy policy. A unionist describes the resolution of these conflicts and the remaining tensions between environmental organizations and the Austrian trade unions as follows:

…to avoid that the historic conflicts with civil society and especially environmental movements in environmental questions just go on and on, we have tried to work together on certain questions, and we have found that the solution to overcoming the former tensions between us lies in a continuous process of hard work, through which confidence is created. This new built confidence enables both sides to endure conflicts in future. However, it is also clear that we are not in every aspect entirely in sync and we have different positions here and there. (Interview #2)

The differences are mainly caused by the different interests, organizational structures, and approaches. They can further be regarded as drivers of tensions and mutual scepticism. Although environmental movements have often engaged in social and economic questions and followed a broader political agenda, Austrian unions perceive their political goals often as too narrowly focused on certain fields and argue that their goals do not consider broader social and economic effects. Respectively, environmental movements have often accused unions of conservatism as they engage in reformism rather than a more systemic transformation. These tensions are regarded as one major source of conflict between trade unions and environmental movements (Jakopovich, 2009). Nevertheless, cooperation between them and the benefits arising from such political partnerships are widely acknowledged among Austrian unionists. These already influence the political positions and strategies of Austrian trade unions.

For example, at the last ÖGB Bundeskongress, the basic positions of ‘Wege aus der Krise’ (‘Paths out of the crisis’, a cooperation platform between unions and NGOs) regarding positions to eco-taxes and the energy system transformation were practically adopted unanimously. Hence, it is not that cooperation has no effect on the whole organization. (Interview #2)

As the quote exemplifies, Austrian trade unions perceive their cooperation with environmental movements and other forces of civil society as fruitful platforms to exchange ideas, where common ground can be found, joint positions can be articulated, and knowledge and expertise can be shared.
One interviewee expressed the view that these aspects are important for both sides, because they enable mutually beneficial learning processes and information exchange.

I believe that together with the NGOs we have accomplished the development of a more holistic view in these areas. We have a social interest and we expect that they also support this interest. The cooperation can not only be that we represent environmental concerns, but that we also find common ground in social questions, and that does not seem so difficult. I mean, they do not have a high level of expertise in this area, but from the perspective of their basic attitude it is still possible to discuss these problems with them and they see it this way too. (Interview #2)

In this context, another unionist recognizes and emphasizes the importance of such cooperation beyond information exchange as a means of driving political action towards a socially just reconstruction of the energy system and beyond.

I basically believe they [different forms of cooperation] have an incredibly important and central role. Especially nowadays, when trade unions are in the defensive and the membership base is continuously shrinking, etc., cooperation with environmental movements and other non-government organizations can set impulses in the direction of systemic changes and we can support this process if the conditions are right. (Interview #6)

Attempts at cooperation between NGOs and Austrian trade unions have now reached a new level, as these links have been loosely institutionalized. The platforms ‘Wege aus der Krise’ (‘Pathways out of the crisis’) as well as the initiative ‘Umwelt + Bauen’3 (‘Environment & Construction’) were set up as permanent cooperation platforms in 2010. These platforms have allowed Austrian unions and environmental NGOs to meet on a regular basis and work together on common thematic fields of action, holding meetings and sharing information and expertise in relevant political areas. The platform ‘Pathways out of the crisis’ also built the basis for unions and NGOs to develop common campaigns. For instance, the platform regularly issues an alternative government budget (‘Zukunftsbudget’, Budget for the Future) in which they voice their opinion, suggest alternatives and propose policy recommendations. Jakopovich (2009) argues in respect to such platforms and alliances that they can create a new power dynamic resulting in increased political pressure on power figures.

The emergence of such alliances and platforms can be seen as a reaction to profound societal changes or crises. Examples are the cooperation between trade unions and environmental organizations within the antiglobalization movement around the turn of the millennium (Gregory, Hildebrandt, Le Blansch, & Lorentzen, 1999) or in Austria the movement against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 2002. The current cooperation platforms, such as ‘Pathways out of the crisis’, can also be understood against the background of the economic and fiscal crisis 2008/2009.

In crisis situations and in conditions of societal change, unions recognize the benefits arising from alliances and their political potential to shift the current discourse positively into the direction of broader societal interests. As a leading unionist explains: We can use these platforms for the purpose of two strategies. On the one hand, we can keep our role as an important part of the institutionalized social partnership. On the other, we can make use of such platforms in a more active way. (Interview #2)

Interestingly, this statement shows that these platforms do not only allow unions to build alliances and receive additional support for their political goals. They can be interpreted in terms of a repoliticization of the Austrian trade union movement as they help trade unions to engage in broader societal questions that demand a systemic transformation and go beyond reformism. Further, they also show that the institutionalized social partnership in Austria may constrain their political room-for-maneuver and such platforms allow them to formulate more accentuated political
positions beyond their main fields of political action as for instance employment relations. This aspect is also in line with a former study by Brand and Pawloff (2014), where the authors showed that the committees of the Austrian social partnership can act as an ex ante filter with respect to the implementation of climate policies resulting in a postponing of climate policies in situations where these policies are in direct conflict with union interests. Overall, the example of developments in the Austrian energy sector shows that conflicts between environmental and trade union movements can have long-lasting consequences for their relationship as well as for the status of environmental concerns within unions. In Austria, the conflicts arising around the erection of power plants led to an almost complete retraction of unions in environmental questions and their solution. However, a generally increasing awareness of environmental issues caused by climate change and environmental depletion together with the neo-liberal shift in the politico-economic framework has led unions to reconsider their stance towards ecological questions and environmental movements. Recently, this has also led to the emergence of new forms of cooperation and alliances between environmentalists and unionists, which have been slowly institutionalized over the course of the last years. A major driver of this process has been that both parties recognized the mutual political benefits of this cooperation, such as new power dynamics and increased influence to shape public discourses.

Discussion: breaking with the logics of growth and competition?

In the previous section, we outlined the signs of an increasing awareness of ecological questions within the trade unions, as well as the signs of new promising forms of cooperation with environmental movements. Yet, several authors have pointed out the central conflict line regarding the ‘contradictory relationship between growth, preservation of employment and redistribution on the one side, and environmental protection on the other side’ (Walk & Brunnengräber, 2000, p. 70). This constitutes a pivotal point, as the reasons for environmental depletion and climate change are closely linked to a development model oriented towards growth, acceleration, and fossil fuels, which is also still dominant within the trade union ideology (Brunnengräber & Weber, 2008). This interlocking of a growth-oriented development model with a ‘corporatist Keynesian class compromise’ (Altvater, 2005, p. 98) has been a constitutive element of the policy strategy of trade unions in Austria. Tálos et al. (1997), a close observer of the Austrian social partnership, argues that ‘... trade unions start from the understanding that the increase and improvement of productivity is one of the requirements for further improvements of the living standard of the people’ (Tálos et al., 1997, p. 438). As economic growth has been and still is strongly connected to reduced unemployment, Austrian trade unions support a growth model (Antal, 2014; Marterbauer, 2011), which is based on fossil fuels, severe environmental impacts, and globalized trade relations.

In current policy debates that aim to tackle environmental questions, we find that Austrian trade unions still rely quite heavily on the ‘imperative for economic growth and full employment (often male) in the formal economy’ (Barry, 2012, p. 230). Due to its reliance on unsustainable production patterns, this model conflicts with environmental and climate protection. This leads to situations where Austrian trade unions retract themselves from actively engaging in climate or environmental policies that endanger or potentially threaten the general employment situation. Thus Austrian trade unions often build strategic alliances with industry. These alliances are reinforced by the Austrian system of social partnership and against the background of the potential threat of relocating businesses. For instance, the negative impacts of environmental and climate policies are mentioned in the statements of the social partners: although the social partners commit themselves to ‘a
reduction of greenhouse gases’ they also acknowledge that resulting ‘negative effects for business locations’ are to be prevented (Austrian Social Partners, 2008, p. 1, our translation).

This strategic alliance with the employer side can also be explained by the lack of alternatives, as the scope of action for trade unions is very limited due to the fundamental orientation outlined for social partnership. While industry always has an ‘exit option’ (company relocations), trade unions ‘in this policy field only [have] the loyalty and voice option, both of which can be reinforced by an alliance with industry’ (Walk & Brunnengräber, 2000, p. 70). In practice, this means that trade unions often back company strategies in the interests and logic of competition, or attempt to negotiate improvements via social partnership structures. These usually operate within the prevailing modernization strategies that focus above all on technological and market-based solutions (Felli, 2014), and rarely push for more fundamental structural changes.

When the growth-oriented development model is problematized, we find arguments for a new ‘model of growth and distribution’ (Union of Production Workers, 2013, p. 8, our translation), which is based on the decoupling of economic growth and resource consumption by means of efficiency increases (GPA-DjP, 2015, p. 137). In a similar vein, concepts for a ‘sustainable growth’ (Austrian Trade Union Federation, 2013, p. 81; GPA-DjP, 2015, p. 126) are highlighted by Austrian trade unions. Yet, the limits and flaws of such techno-optimist ideas as well as fundamental contradictions between material growth-oriented policies and ecological problems highlighted by several scholars (e.g. Jackson, 2017) are rarely reflected upon. Thus Austrian trade unions also adhere to the possibility of decoupling economic growth from environmental pollution on the macro level, which in light of its empirical assessment has been termed a ‘key fantasy’ of the twenty-first century (Fletcher & Rammelt, 2017).

Recent campaigns for ‘green jobs’ can be read similarly (Umwelt und Bauen, 2011). Doubtlessly, such campaigns have important bridging functions as they contribute to a positive connotation of environmental issues within the trade unions. However, there is also a risk that sectors that work in areas that are difficult to reconcile with environmental objectives, such as the automotive or steel industry, are not included in debates. Particularly in these sectors, trade unions are confronted with the challenge of outlining fundamental structural conversion scenarios that reconcile the interests of employees with environmental objectives. Additionally, union-driven campaigns for investment in green jobs remain limited and are mostly accompanied by a critique about the quality of work in emerging green jobs in Austria (First, 2009; Leitner, Wroblewski, Littig, & Reisenzaun, 2012). Political strategies to promote green jobs, which are also good quality jobs are surprisingly not at the centre of trade union practices.

**Conclusion: new models of prosperity as a starting point for a trade union environmental policy**

Austrian trade unions rarely succeed in formulating independent environmental and climate policies. Policies are instead drafted along specific problem areas of trade union practices and are often in alliance with employers’ strategies. The examples of Hainburg and Zwentendorf have shown how such conflicts rooted in different forms of the ‘job vs. environment’ dilemma have resulted in an almost complete retraction of union activities from environmental issues over the last few decades.

Given the continuing ‘multiple crises’ (Brand, 2009), the loss of trade union power, the political shift towards neo-liberal policies, and the increase in (global) distributional conflicts, trade unions are increasingly looking for new pathways. In the near future, this process of reorientation may
loosen their strong bonds to ‘growth-oriented development models’, which at this time still prevail. A process of reorientation can also open up possibilities for new discussions about a social–ecological transformation (Rotmans & Fischer-Kowalski, 2009) and new alliances. The new emerging forms of cooperation and alliances, resulting from a quest for common political ground, can potentially become the starting point for broader societal alliances that actively engage in a social–ecological transformation, and for new models of prosperity that develop other concepts of nutrition and food supply, mobility, energy supply, communication, and housing (Brand, 2014).

For instance, in Austria the common work of unions with environmental NGOs has led to the creation and anchoring of alternative conceptions of growth into their political agendas. Recently, the Chamber of Labour and Austria’s unions together with environmental NGOs have fostered the concept of ‘prosperity-oriented growth’. This concept strives for a reorientation of economic policy towards forms of qualitative growth, e.g. life satisfaction, a healthy environment, and social inclusion. In this understanding, GDP is not a central objective anymore. A recent paper by Feigl (2017) – employee at the Chamber of Labour Vienna – outlining the prosperity-oriented economic policymaking shows the engagement with current ‘beyond growth’ debates and the questioning of orthodox growth models. However, this does not mean that the GDP is completely replaced by other socio-economic indicators.

As Polanyi already wrote in 1934, the secret of success is connected to the capability of forming broad alliances that include more than the narrow interests of individual interest groups. The new forms of cooperation between environmental movements and unionists (e.g. ‘Umwelt&Bauen’ and ‘Wege aus der Krise’) indicate the already ongoing quest in this direction and Austria’s trade unions as well as Austria’s environmental organizations have recognized them as success stories because they help to dissolve political conflicts at an early stage, build common political ground, and foster joint political action.

Although new forms of political alliances that seek to develop a social–ecological reorientation of our current economic systems can be identified, more research in this direction is needed. For instance, the question which organizational processes and structures will allow unions to break with the currently existing dependence on growth-centred development models remains open.

Notes

1. The article is based on research findings from the project ‘TRAFO-Labour. The Case of Austria’. The trans- and interdisciplinary project was financed by the Austrian Climate- and Energy Fund, and was realized within the ‘ACRP 6th Call’ between 2014 and 2016.
2. ‘Wege aus der Krise’ is a cooperation platform between unions and NGOs founded after the outbreak of the financial and economic crises in 2008. The goal of this alliance is to promote alternative economic, environmental, and social policies in order to build equal, sustainable, and democratic society. http://www.wege-aus-der-krise.at/ueber-uns/allianz.html (Accessed 14 October 2016).
3. ‘Umwelt + Bauen’ is an initiative founded in 2010 by 15 organizations including unions, environmental NGOs, and industry to support affordable housing, subsidies for thermal renovation, and future-oriented climate and energy policies. http://www.umwelt-bauen.at/ (Accessed 14 October 2016).

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to Judith Kohlenberger, Lukas Neissl, and Halliki Kreinin for their comments on an earlier version of the manuscript and to the three anonymous reviewers for their advice and comments. We also want to thank Ulrich Brand, Sigrid Stagl, Beate Littig, Hubert Eichmann and Astrid Segert.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

As part of the research project TRAFO-Labour, the work presented here was funded by the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund (Grant No. B368588).

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References


Marterbauer, M. (2011). Zahlen bitte!: die Kosten der Krise tragen wir alle [Please pay! We all have to bear the cost of the crisis]. Vienna: Deuticke.


Appendix A: List of documents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document type</th>
<th>Period of time</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Organizational unit</th>
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<td>Position papers</td>
<td>2008–2015</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>AK, ÖGB, GPA-DjP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic programmes</td>
<td>2007–2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>ÖGB, GPA-DjP, PRO-GE, VIDA</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Agreed proposals</td>
<td>2007–2015</td>
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Appendix B: List of interviewees.

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<th>Organizational level</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>VIDA (Transport and Service Union)</td>
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<td>Sectoral</td>
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<td>Department for Environment and Mobility</td>
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<td>6</td>
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