

## Dear Len McCluskey: there are no union jobs on a dead planet

Gareth Dale

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*Len McCluskey, leader of the Unite union, backed Heathrow III.*

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Garry Knight

**Len McCluskey, the leader of the Unite union, supported the vote for a third runway at Heathrow Airport and called for Labour MPs to vote with the Tories**

## and DUP. GARETH DALE argues this was a set back for trade unionists the world over

**McCluskey appeals to the interests of Heathrow workers and their children and grandchildren. But what lives await them if global warming accelerates unchecked?**

The trade unions will be crucial to climate-change mitigation and adaptation. But you wouldn't know it from recent comments by their leaders in Britain.

Take the intervention by Len McCluskey into the parliamentary debate on a third runway at Heathrow. Had all Labour MPs followed their leader—Jeremy Corbyn—into the 'No' lobby the vote would have been close.

The Unite leader encouraged them to cast their ballots with the Tories and the DUP, and most of them did, securing for the government a mighty majority and boosting the prime minister's standing. By backing a third runway, McCluskey promised, they would help "create hundreds of thousands of new jobs."

### Vulnerable territories

If "new jobs" were one day required for the construction of elaborate machineries of human sacrifice would McCluskey urge 'Yes' then too? I fear he would.

For Heathrow III is precisely that. Enabling up to 260,000 extra take-offs and landings per year, it will siphon oceans of hydrocarbons from the lithosphere into the atmosphere.

This will intensify the feedbacks that are propelling the planet toward a rise of six degrees Celsius or more—an "extreme greenhouse state" with, in all likelihood, remnants of humanity pushed to polar latitudes and scrabbling to subsist.

McCluskey appeals to the interests of Heathrow workers and their children and grandchildren. But what lives await them if global warming accelerates unchecked?

Those predicted to suffer first and hardest will be in territories vulnerable to climate change: in South and East Asia, the Middle East and Africa. But Middlesex and Surrey will not escape.

### Aviation fuel

A glance at recent trends and volatility in Heathrow's own region is unsettling enough. In South East England, May 2018 was the hottest since records began over a century ago, and June was the driest.

The Junes of 2012 and 2016 were the wettest on record, and in between came July 2015, when a new July temperature record was set for the UK—appropriately, at Heathrow itself.

To this, the Professor Panglosses have a one-word response. Technology. Bring on the biofuel! But this has been tried. One flight from Heathrow to Amsterdam ran on a mix of nineteen parts jet fuel to one part biofuel.

Given that even that tiny fraction was distilled from 150,000 coconuts, how many coconut cocktails would it take to fuel *all* Heathrow's aircraft? And if an average palm yields 60 coconuts per year, how much land and.... well, you do the maths.

Of course, other materials may emerge to knock off the coconut. Scientists have succeeded in imitating aviation fuel using sources such as "municipal waste and even grease from restaurants and sewers." Good luck with that harvest.

### Profit accumulation

Will Heathrow expansion provide the jobs that McCluskey promises? Already, Unite's regional secretary has revised the figure down by an order of magnitude, to "tens of thousands of new jobs".

From Heathrow's recent history, expect that to shrink further. Back in 2008, thousands of new jobs were promised in connection with the construction of Terminal 5, but the airport [now employs](#) several thousand fewer people than it did then.

The same logic - of capital accumulation - pushes businesses to shed jobs *and* to ramp up production without regard to the environmental effects. It makes them raise pressure on employees - with periodic stress relief available in the form of trips abroad. [Three-quarters of flights out of Heathrow](#) are for leisure.

With higher levels of demand, and increased supply at Heathrow, other locations will be forced to follow suit. If Heathrow is allowed to expand, Caroline Lucas has [warned](#), it'll resemble an arms race among Europe's airports, each one fighting for more passengers.

This is the 'arms race' that some trade union leaders embrace. In the case of Heathrow III, the prime minister, Theresa May, announced that the decision was taken not for reasons of profit accumulation and business lobbying but for "[jobs and growth](#)" - and one or two union leaders have bought this line too.

### **Struck in solidarity**

But the 'arms race' can be resisted. There are alternatives, and unions can be central to them.

Ecological questions, including issues such as climate change that pose major challenges to 'intergenerational social reproduction,' are of [quite as much concern to 'labour'](#) as are questions concerning pay and working conditions.

The environment is not an 'externality', as capital and its apologists would have it, but is of existential and universal concern.

The classic instance of 'green' unionism were the ['green bans'](#) of 1970s Australia. They were sparked when a group of Sydney women approached the Builders Labourers Federation for assistance in preventing construction on undeveloped bushland.

The BLF agreed and, when the developer called in scabs, BLF members on other sites struck in solidarity. The movement spread, and it was from here that the word 'green' made its way into general [political discourse](#).

### **Transport systems**

Environmental change necessitates social change. The latter will come, and at an accelerating pace. What is up for grabs is its ecological and social content.

In the utopian distance, the goal must be a relaxed and less harried society, lacking the *compulsive* drives to travel far, a society that resolves to restore this orb of ours to a habitable state.

In the short run, many domestic and European flights - around half the flights from Heathrow - could be replaced by train and coach travel.

Changes to transport systems of this scope require state-led investment, and a large-scale reallocation of resources and labour. In countries including [Britain](#), [South Africa](#) and [Norway](#), union-backed 'climate jobs' initiatives have pressed for this.

They seek to win the union movement behind plans for a 'just transition', with jobs guarantees for any worker who faces redundancy due to the shift from high- to low-carbon energy and transport systems.

### **Emergency motion**

In Britain, the conflict between let-the-planet-burn unionism and green unionism is delicately poised.

Some union leaderships follow Unite in promoting Heathrow expansion. Others, such as the PCS and the NUT, support climate jobs programmes.

The Trades Union Congress is blown hither and thither. It backs [Heathrow expansion](#), but also a just transition for workers—and it is the first major national union federation to have officially endorsed [divestment](#) from fossil fuels.

The divide runs within the unions too. This week, the Unite policy conference has been debating the Swansea tidal lagoon project, the cancellation of which the government announced on the day of the Heathrow vote.

The Unite leadership had not campaigned for this major renewable energy project. Delegates from the Welsh region proposed an emergency motion that forces them to do so. It passed, unanimously.

And the divide cleaves the Labour left. McCluskey is one of Corbyn's key backers.

But Corbyn's closest ally, John McDonnell, is a dedicated supporter of environmental causes and an ardent opponent of Heathrow expansion. Much hangs on how these conflicts will play out.

### This Author

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