

Colombia Case Report

Just Transition in Colombia: Labour unions and popular movements taking the lead.

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1. Introduction

Photo: La Guajira, Juan Carlos Solano

Colombia's geographic and socioeconomic characteristics make the country **highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change**. Temperatures are on the rise, causing the glaciers of the Andes to melt. Higher intensity of rains leads to floods and landslides in some regions, while other have experienced severe droughts that impact agriculture and hydropower generation. **94 per cent of Colombians recognize effects of climate change on their daily lives (EIB 2023).**

In 2023, Colombia was responsible for 0.42 percent of current global GHG emissions (EC Joint Research Centre and IEA, 2024), and much less when counting historically accumulated emissions.

The biggest source of GHG emissions in Colombia is livestock, responsible for 47.8 percent of GHG emissions (mainly through deforestation and “land use change”) and agriculture has a share of 4.1 per cent. Land transport (15.4 per cent), petroleum refining (7.4 per cent), electricity (3.8 per cent), oil (2.6 per cent) and coal (1.4 per cent) all together have a share of 30.8 percent of the GHG emissions. Livestock, agriculture and the mining and energy sector, together produce almost 85 per cent of the GHG emissions, but only approximately 25 per cent of the GDP. While all other sectors together produce three quarters of the GDP emitting 16.3 per cent of total GHG (DNP, 2024). The territorial GHG emissions amounted to 223,967 Mt, 4,371 t per capita, about a third of Germany’s territorial GHG emissions, but more than twice the maximum per capita GHG emissions to keep global temperature increase below 1.5°C (Crippa et al., 2024, pp. 94, 127).

Colombia’s Climate Policies

Colombia’s climate policies are framed as the programme of an “energy transition” and began under the right-wing presidents Juan Manuel Santos (2014–2018) and Iván Duque (2018–2022). They aimed mainly at attracting transnational capital investments in big scale renewable energy projects while intensifying oil and coal exploitation for export. In 2020, Colombia submitted its first NDC, with the goal of reducing emissions by 51 per cent by 2030 and achieving net zero by 2050 (CCPI, 2025). Climate Action Tracker rated the climate targets and policies in November 2022 as “insufficient.” The climate policies were projected to result in approximately 24 percent over target, considered consistent with 3°C of warming relative to modelled emissions pathways (CAT, 2022).

In August 2022 a leftist government took office for the first time in the country’s history. Newly elected president Gustavo Petro pledged to make climate policies a priority and reformulate climate and energy transition policies in order to meet the

goals. He had run for president with a government program elaborated with the contributions of popular assemblies. It stated early on the aim to turn Colombia into a leading country in the fight against climate change. In order to achieve net zero emissions and meet national and international climate targets Colombia would have to undergo “the total transformation of the economy” (Pacto Histórico, 2022a, pp. 6–7). The program envisioned “gradually abandoning dependence on oil, coal and all types of mining and illegal economies, as well as agricultural production models that destroy nature and reproduce poverty” (Pacto Histórico, 2022b, pp. 6–7). This represents a difficult task for a country where oil and coal exports make up for more than half of total exports, the national bourgeoisie is aligned with transnational oil and mining corporations, and the government does not have the majority in the bicameral national legislature.

At the centre of the government’s climate policies is the Just Energy Transition (JET). It aims at phasing out production and consumption of fossil fuels. The declared goals are to reduce GHG emissions and close the social and environmental gaps in the country. But the country has also to transition out of the 70 per cent dependency on hydropower in electricity generation, which has become unreliable due to climate change (IEA, 2021). The alternative focus is on solar and wind energy and small hydropower plants hand in hand with a wider range of other alternative and renewable energy sources to be explored and implemented (Minenergía, 2025b). All sectors, from communities and labour unions to private companies operating in the energy and fossil fuel sectors are supposed to participate in developing the JET. Alternative projects are to be developed preferably with and for communities, also decentralizing and democratizing energy production and access (Pacto Histórico, 2022a; Gobierno del Cambio, 2023; Minenergía, 2023b). To create economic alternatives for the approximately 200.000 workers of the fossil fuel sector is a pressing issue. The economic diversification cannot be limited to renewable energies, which according to estimates will create some 20.000–30.000 jobs (Interviewee 1, 8).

The Petro government has published several policy documents regarding the JET, ranging from sectorial analyses to results of consultations with different actors. Based on all documents and on updated data, the government presented in early 2025 the “Roadmap for Colombia’s Just Energy Transition” (Minenergía, 2025). It concludes: “Previous policies are inconsistent with COP 26 commitments” and that the “JET aligns with the most ambitious NEP [National Energy Plan] scenario. It reduces emissions three times more than previous commitments” (Minenergía, 2025a, p. 8).

Labour Movement and Just Transition

Despite a very low overall union density in Colombia, unions are strong in some sectors, as in the mining and energy sector. What stands out in comparison with other countries is that, building alliances with social, ecological and indigenous movements, mining and energy unions have questioned fossil fuel extraction for almost three decades. Considering the exceptional case of a peripheral country that is heavily dependent on fossil fuel exports, but in which labour unions and meanwhile also the government advocate for phasing out fossil fuels, this report investigates how labour unions engage with climate change, energy transition and just transition. What is the importance of the issue of climate change for labour unions from different sectors and what are their positions? What are their political demands, proposals and struggles in regard of the climate crisis? How do they relate to the government’s energy transition policies? How can unions influence the Just Energy Transition? What are their proposals and projects, what are their strategies to advance their demands in public and in concert with the government? What is the unions’ understanding of Just Transition?

To answer these questions, the case study approach of the report is based on extensive desktop research between October 2024 and July 2025, using publicly available data and publications, including research papers, institutional documents, documents from unions and their allies, articles and statements, combined with 14 semi-structured interviews with researchers from think tanks and

officials from the most relevant labour unions in Colombia in the context of the JET. These include the umbrella union CUT, the oil workers union USO, the electric energy workers’ union Sintraeicol, the coal miners’ union Sintracarbón, the transport worker union SNTT, the coordination of several unions in the palm oil sector Coordinadora Sindical Palmera Magdalena Medio CSPMM, the National Union of Mining, Petrochemical, Agrofuel and Energy Workers Sintramienergetica, the Mining and Energy Trade Union Federation FuntraMiexco, the teachers union Fecode and the health workers union Anthoc. In addition, a consultant for the Collective of Workers for a Just Transition and researchers from the Just Transition Research Centre Transforma and from the union research institute Cipame were also interviewed.

Labour unions played an important role in Petro’s electoral campaign and support the governments climate policies, although some unionists criticize the poor coordination in the government and the still limited consultation and participation of workers and communities. An active role in the debates on the Just Energy Transition is limited to labour unions in directly affected sectors such as energy and mining, transport, and the palm and banana industries.

The international demand for Colombian coal is shrinking and the oil peak is close. The economically important coal and oil exports need strategic replacement. A breaking point that made labour unions realize the urgency of a planned just transition was the sudden advanced closure of the open pit coal mines La Jagua and Calenturitas (Cesar), announced 4 February 2021 (Prodeco, 2021), dismissing 7,000 workers and offering neither a compensation for the workers nor the recovery and restoration of affected areas (Mandarina, 2024). Faced with this experience, all major coal workers' unions began collaborating closely to fight for a just transition. The main unions from the oil and gas sector, energy, transport and palm oil industries participated in debates on just transition, developed demands and proposals, and built alliances for a state-regulated just transition that does justice to workers, communities and the environment and reindustrializes the country without reproducing the extractive and exploitative historical and contemporary North-South relations.

This report describes and analyses the longer-term processes that led Colombian unions to this

point, and the activities for a Just Transition that they have engaged in since. It proceeds as follows: First, in chapter 2, we look at the economic model, the industrial relations and the consequences for Colombia of the most recent crises. Here we can also identify several drivers for the energy transition beyond environmental and climate reasons. This is followed by a general overview of the climate policies of the Petro government, a more detailed look at the Just Energy Transition Road Map orienting the JET policies, and its emblematic construction, and a brief explication of the opposition to the climate policies. Chapter 3 focuses labour unions J(E)T debates and policies, looking first at their general positions on climate change and their specific points of view and demands for a JT. This is followed by unions' JT debates, several concrete examples of union JT activities, and an analysis of the contestation of JT inside the labour movement. The chapter ends with a summary and analysis of what JT means in Colombia. The fourth and last chapter draws some preliminary conclusions.



Photo: La Guajira, Juan Carlos Solano



2. Economic model, labour and climate policy in Colombia

Colombia's climate policies and the positions and demands of the labour movement can only be analysed and understood by looking at the **specific political and economic context in which they are unfolding.**

2.1 Economic Model, Industrial Relations, and the Effect of Recent Crises

Beginning in the 1990s, Colombian governments introduced a broad neoliberal privatization agenda. Private companies entered education and healthcare, highways and the national phone company were privatized. The state-owned mining and coal mining companies ceased to exist and in 2003 the state-controlled oil sector was opened to private investments while fossil fuels exploitation and export were promoted aggressively. Today Colombia is the world's twelfth largest thermal coal producer and the sixth largest seaborne coal exporter. 90 per cent of coal mining is export oriented and controlled by transnational mining companies (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, pp. 8–9, 16). Taxes and royalties from oil and gas contribute 10 percent to the state revenues and coal 2.4 per cent. Almost half of foreign direct investments and 60 percent of the country's exports are originated by coal mining and oil extraction (ANM, 2024; Pardo Becerra et al., 2021a, p. 81; The Coal Hub, 2024; Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 16).

Particularly the coal mining areas are enclave economies. Enclave economy refers to a colonial model like it existed in the Caribbean and Latin America in 1600. That is to say, relatively small areas where sugar cane syrup or gold and silver were extracted, to be transported to Spain, were defended militarily, securing transport routes and port cities. In Colombia 90 per cent of coal mining is located in the two departments La Guajira and Cesar on the Caribbean coast, where it contributed with respectively 61 and 43 per cent to the total revenues of the departments in 2019–2020, with almost no service or industrial activity not organized around the mine. (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, pp. 8–9, 16).

The mining companies, like the plantations in a colonial economy, lend the workers money, e.g. to buy a house, a car, etc. The workers pay back the loan in instalments that are deducted from their income. This mechanism ties the workers to the company. When Glencore subsidiary Prodeco closed the mines La Jagua and Calenturas the

workers ended up emptyhanded instead of receiving a compensation, because the company deducted their debts from the compensations (Interviewee 1).

The extractivist dimension of the enclave economy becomes also evident looking at the fossil fuel share of the GDP and the labour market. In 2019 it was at 4.45 per cent of the GDP (oil 3.38 per cent and coal 1.07 per cent), while in January 2020 only 0.8 per cent of all jobs were in the sector of fossil fuel and mining industries (Pardo Becerra et al., 2021a, p. 75). Edgar Mojica Vanegas, Secretary General of the umbrella union CUT, referred to it as “accumulation through dispossession” (Nuñez, 2020, p. 26).

The opening of the energy sector for private investors and the intensification of extractive industries went along with a massive outsourcing of labour to subcontractors, causing widespread precarization of labour conditions. In 2024 57.8 per cent of the workforce had informal work arrangements, almost ten percentage points more than the regional average (OECD, 2024, p. 7). The same year, Ecopetrol had 9,665 direct employees and 87,683 subcontracted jobs (Ecopetrol, 2025b, 2025a). Labour outsourcing is considered one of the major issues by the labour movement, which therefore connects a Just (Energy) Transition to a labour law reform (Interviewees 1; 3; 5). Outsourcing is also a preoccupation of the unions regarding the coal mine closures. Mining companies are hiring under precarious conditions or outsourcing workers so that in case of a mine closure they bear no responsibility for them (Interviewee 1).

Although the Colombian Constitution from 1991 guarantees labour union rights and collective bargaining, the reality has been very different. Looking to provide security to their operations and ensure profits, the oil and mining corporations have relied heavily on the state's repressive apparatus and caused a proliferation of paramilitary groups attacking and killing social and union activists, especially around contract negotiations and

workers' protests (Zelik and Azzellini, 2000; Azzellini, 2009). The same happened in the export oriented agricultural sectors, especially in the palm oil and banana industry (Interviewee 7). Together with the high informality rate this contributes to a very low union density in Colombia and affects deeply the freedom of association and the power of unions.

Labor unions have historically, nevertheless, played an important role in certain sectors and in Colombia as a whole. This is the case of the USO with some 30.000 affiliates, the coal workers unions Sintracarbón and Sintramienergética, the transport union SNTT, the teachers' union Fecode, and the palm industry unions coordination CSPMM, bringing together almost 20 unions from palm producing companies to palm processing industries. In sectors crucial in the energy transition, unions have a consolidated presence and expertise. These unions have in common that they are relatively big, have a better political projection than other unions, are in a position to strategize on the sectoral level, and are part of the federation CUT (Interviewee 7). The higher salaries in the mining and energy sector are due to the high profit rates, the historically strong unions of the sector and its strategic relevance, and the companies' interest in pacifying workers to avoid stoppages.

The economic model based in transnational extractive industries found its continuation in the energy transition of the right-wing governments. The first law promoting renewable energy sources and energy efficiency was sanctioned in 2014 (Ley 1715, 2014) and emended in 2021 (Ley 2099, 2021). It traced a path for renewable energies combining local use of renewable energy for non-interconnected zones and provisions for the dynamization of a private energy market, goals set also by the National Energy Plan 2020–2050 (UPME-MME, 2021). The NDC of a territorial GHG emissions reduction of 51 percent by 2030 and net-

Zero CO2 emissions by 2050 were laid down in the Climate Action Law of 2021 (Gobierno de Colombia, 2022b). Simultaneously, the Duque government argued that coal mining should continue and finance the energy transition. A policy paper on the energy transition (DNP, 2022), a National Mobility Strategy with a gender focus (MinTransporte, 2022), and a long-term climate strategy "E2050" (Gobierno de Colombia, 2022a) followed.

The energy transition laws of the Duque government 2019–2021 focused mainly on creating business opportunities in a "green economy" (Interviewee 7). The investments reproduced the dependency and exploitation structures of the fossil fuel sector in the renewable energy sector, as the investment agreements amounting to US\$1.6 billion signed in 2022 with the transnational energy companies Powertis, Solarpack, Ecoener, Cox Energy and Greenenergy to build huge solar energy farms (Asoenergía, 2022, p. 5).¹

The Colombian climate think tank Transforma evaluated the laws and programs in a Climate Policy Implementation Check for Climate Transparency as medium. The legal status was considered strong, but they lacked oversight and resources (Transforma, 2023). The Ministry of Mines and Energy, based on a long term modelling of data, concluded in 2025 that the climate measures decided until 2022 would maintain Colombia fossil fuel dependent in 2050 at still more than 70 per cent (Minenergía, 2025, p. 15).

The leftist candidate Gustavo Petro took over the presidency of Colombia in August 2022 under adverse circumstances. The drastic reduction of economic activities in Colombia in March 2020 due to the Covid pandemic had reduced also the demand and prices for oil and coal. In April 2020, oil prices had even reached an historic low of less than US\$34 per barrel. Reduced export revenues led to a deficit, the resources available for financing

¹ For a more detailed account of Colombia's climate policies before the Petro government see (Avendaño, Soler and Torre, 2018; Escallón, Rodríguez and Quintero, 2021; Monroy and Rojas, 2021)

the energy transition diminished, the ability for investments declined. The country had to rely on other resources, such as the Stabilization and Savings Fund for fuel and external debt. The Duque government did not distribute the funds among the public, but put them into the hands of the traditional private sector, which did not invest in revitalizing the economy, impacting expected revenues and also investment budgets for energy communities and the energy transition roadmap (Interview 3). Widespread layoffs were enacted across all industries, including the oil industry. The very strict lockdown during the Covid pandemic heavily affected the work of unions.

Subsequently, the war in Ukraine led to significant increases in fertilizer prices and supplier shortfalls. Colombia depends heavily on fertilizer imports, and both Ukraine and Russia were among its main suppliers (Interviewee 9). In this problematic context, the revenues from fossil fuel exports were seen as a lifeline for the stumbling economy.

The crisis:

“Emboldened a large number of business, government, union, and political actors, who then came out to say that the energy transition had failed and that, therefore, in the best Fukuyama style, the End of History had already been written, and that now it was simply time to re-energize the search for oil, gas, and coal”.

Interview 3

The deep crisis led workers to prioritize economic survival (Interviewee 10). Finally, in April 2021 a popular uprising broke out that Renán Vega Cantor, Colombia’s most prominent social historian, described as “the most important social mobilization in all of Colombian history. We’re talking about a 200-year history, and in those 200 years, a mobilization of such extraordinary dimensions has never before occurred (Álvarez, Martín and Puello-Socarrás, 2023, pp. 11–12). The government employed massive violence to repress the protests, killing at least 28 people. But the

foundations for a turn in Colombian history and the election of Petro as president had been laid.

With the war in Ukraine coal prices rose again. Local political and economic actors in Cesar showed a strong interest in reopening the mines, others to start new coal mining activities in La Guajira (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 5). The voices ceased again when prices for a ton of Colombian thermal coal dropped from more than US\$400 per ton to US\$80–100 in 2024 and 2025 (Rubio, 2025) because of the shrinking demand in the main markets. Union leaders from the energy sector also consider the possibility that the planned closure of coal mines might happen a bit later than originally planned in 2034. They estimate that the geopolitics of energy in Russia, Ukraine and Europe have slowed down the energy transition by about 10 years, especially regarding cuts in hydrogen investments and coal consumption. However, this will not change the structural and long-term transition to renewable energies (Interview 3).

2.2 Drivers of the Energy Transition

Colombia needs to diversify its strongly fossil-fuel-based energy matrix. In 2023 oil made up 43.3 per cent of the primary energy mix, natural gas 23.1 per cent, coal 13.9 per cent and hydro power 10.1 per cent (UPME, 2025, p. 15). Beyond reducing GHG emissions, there are several other drivers of an energy transition. Electric power generation needs to be diversified although its CO₂ emissions make up only 4 per cent of the total emissions. More than 70 per cent is generated by huge hydroelectric plants highly vulnerable to climatic and meteorological changes (IEA, 2021; Escallón, Rodríguez and Quintero, 2021, pp. 113, 125; Transforma, 2023, p. 11).

The greatest challenge is to phase out coal and oil – a goal pursued not merely for climate reasons, but for a range of other concerns that render it untenable for the country. Prognoses about future demand call for a quick exit from fossil fuel production to avoid future turbulence.

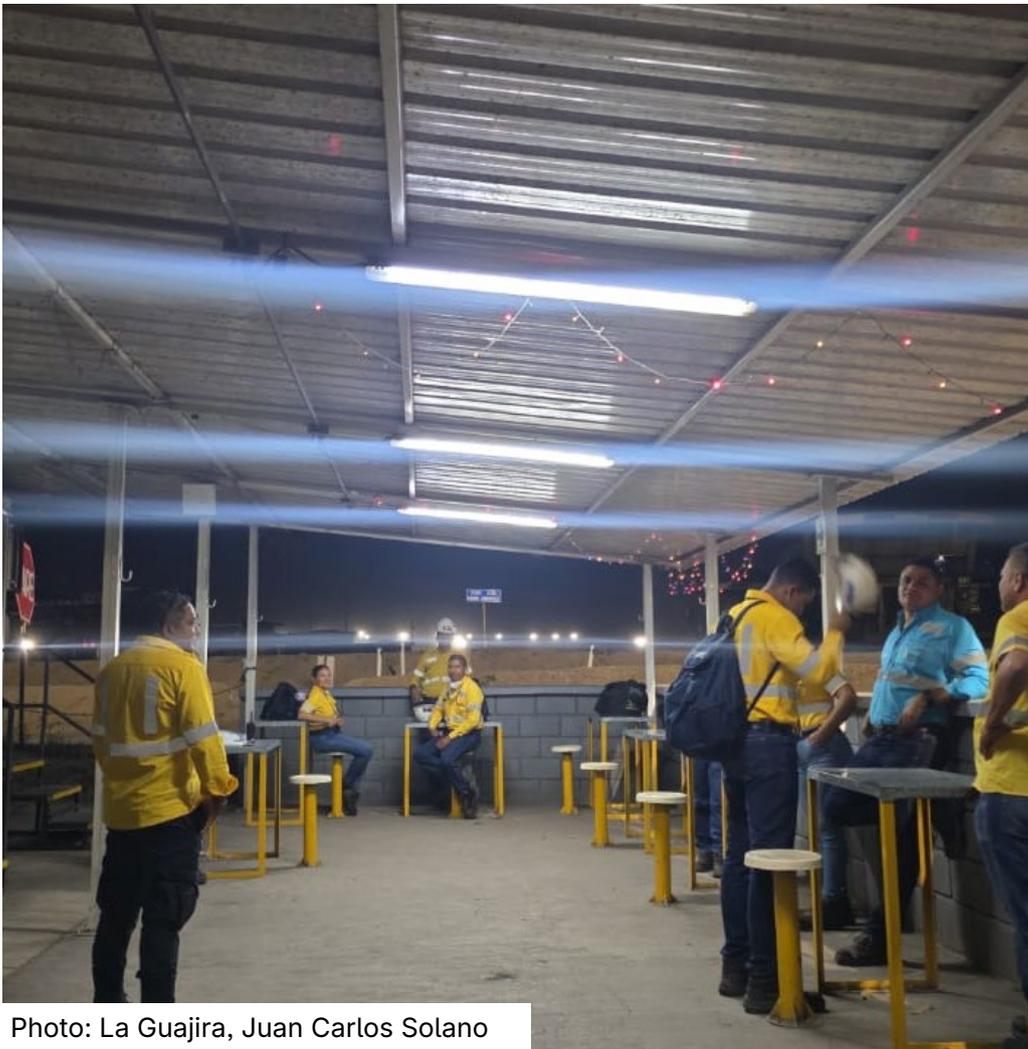


Photo: La Guajira, Juan Carlos Solano

Production and export of oil and especially of coal are tendentially falling. Coal mining companies have reduced their production volumes responding to a shrinking demand in Europe, where 19.4 per cent of the exports go to (ANM, 2025, p. 5). The average annual coal production fell from 88 million tons 2012-19 to 59.6 million tons in 2021, maintaining the volume during the pandemic (with higher revenues due to price hikes) (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 9). The biggest coal producers are Anglo-Swiss Glencore and US American Drummond. In 2021, Glencore subsidiary Prodeco closed the mines La Jagua and Calenturas in Cesar (Prodeco, 2021) and reduced, along with Drummond, investments in coal mining in Colombia (Pardo Becerra et al., 2021a). At the end of March 2025, the Glencore Cerrejón mine –the world’s second largest open pit coal mine with a share of 5.8 per cent in Colombia’s exports– announced an extraction reduction of 5–10 million tons for 2025 from an initially planned 21 million tons (Rubio, 2025). A few days later Drummond

announced a reduction of coal extraction in the open pit mines Mina Pribbenow and El Descanso in the Cesar Coal Basin (Coal Zoom, 2025).

International estimates and the government’s JET Roadmap foresee a falling global coal demand after 2025 (Minenergía, 2025, pp. 20–22), causing more difficulties for Colombian coal to compete on global markets. The main markets in South-East and North-East Asia imply higher fleeting costs for Colombian coal which make it less competitive than Asian or Australian coal (Minenergía, 2025, pp. 12–13). National coal consumption will also diminish. The Petro government signed the Progress Carbon Call committing Colombia to shut down its coal fired power plants by 2030 (Interviewee 7). They will be displaced by non-conventional renewable energy sources on a short to medium term because coal is much more expensive (Minenergía, 2025, p. 22). The coal mining licenses are anyway ending in 2034 and it seems unlikely that they will be renewed.

A study from 2023 concluded that the decline of coal mining is unstoppable and that it is very unlikely that the income from coal and oil exports can be replaced by exports of other minerals or fuels (copper, green hydrogen etc.). If “Colombian policymakers do not respond proactively to these risks, the country could face lost economic output of more than \$88 billion (or 27% of 2019 GDP) between now and 2050” (wtw and Universidad de los Andes, 2023, p. 5). Decarbonization means therefore to replace almost half of foreign direct investments and 60 percent of the country’s exports, and 12.4 per cent state revenues from taxes and royalties from oil and gas.

In 2023 Colombia’s gas reserves were estimated to last another 6.1 years at the current extraction rate, and the oil reserves 7.1 years (AFP, 2024). It is planned to use gas as a transition energy in the JET. Most of the Colombian oil is heavy crude oil with an average production cost per barrel of US\$40 compared to US\$10-15 in the Middle East, which reduces the country’s international competitiveness. The refineries in Colombia also lack the technology to refine huge amounts of heavy crude oil, forcing the country to import 12 per cent of its final energy consumption of liquid fuels for the transport sector (high octane gasoline, jet fuel and diesel), and natural gas and LPG for the power plants generating electricity when hydropower fails. The tendencies in fuel consumption would lead to a loss of energy sovereignty in the long term (Minenergía, 2025, p. 14,17).

Labour unions, like the Petro government, also view the internal armed conflict in Colombia as connected to environmental and social conflicts linked to the extractive mining and energy model intensified over the past 30 years (Vélez Torres, 2022a).

2.3 The Climate and Transition Policies of the Petro Government

Petro’s government program for the presidential elections 2022 promoted a socio-ecological transition including the democratization of access

to clean energy, a sustainable energy transition, the phase-out of coal mining and oil investment, a fracking ban, efforts to reduce deforestation and provision of affordable public transport powered by renewable energies (Pacto Histórico, 2022a). As soon as Petro assumed the Presidency he began promoting a broad range of reforms in key policy areas (health, retirement, labour, mining and others), issued a series of presidential orders and started working on several instruments for long-term planning with the construction of a Just Energy Transition Roadmap as overarching orientation. A National Development Program (PND) 2022–2026 (Gobierno del Cambio, 2023a) was sanctioned in May 2023 after it was discussed in dozens of regional and sectoral assemblies and received thousands of comments online. Labour unions, social movements and communities welcomed the PND, but criticized that space and time provided were not enough for the participation of many affected groups and communities. The PND includes funds to restore nature, develop economic alternatives, and support job reconversion in coal mining regions (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 11). The main goals in the area “Productive Transformation, Internationalization, and Climate Action” were defined as: Additional 2,000 MW from non-conventional renewable energy sources; expand the areas under restoration, recovery, and rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems to 1.7 million hectares (750,000 more than in 2022); Reduce national deforestation by 20 per cent; Increase export share of non-mining and energy goods and services to 56.3 per cent of total exports; double investment in Research and Development (to 0.5 per cent of GDP), and environmentally sustainable transportation” (Gobierno del Cambio, 2023b, p. 2).

2.3.1 Climate Policies of the Petro Government

At the end of 2022 the Colombian government announced that no new oil and gas exploration or drilling licenses would be granted (Transforma, 2023, p. 15), while it assured private investors to respect all contracts signed in the past. Honouring Petro’s campaign promise, fracking was banned completely (Semana, 2022) and seven fracking licenses were cancelled (Vélez Torres, 2022a).

Petro stands firmly to his decision despite a strong opposition. In 2024 he made a call to the state-owned oil company Ecopetrol to stop also any involvement into fracking outside of Colombia. The Petro government is pressuring Ecopetrol to transform from an oil company into an energy company. Ecopetrol created a vice presidency for energy transition and built pilot projects for photovoltaic and hydrogen (green, white, blue, and grey) generation. The first module of a hydrogen generation plant has already been installed at the Cartagena refinery (Interviewee 9). Ecopetrol's scientific centre ICP (Colombian Petroleum Institute) was transformed in 2024 into the ICPET (adding "Transition Energies"). Several interviewees, however, consider that the transformation of Ecopetrol is still not consolidated and also not supported by the company as a whole (Interviewees 7; 8; 9).

In 2017, Colombia implemented a carbon tax of approximately US\$ 5/metric tonne (t) of CO₂ equivalent (CO₂e) for all producers and users of fossil fuels. The Petro government raised the price to approximately US\$ 7, planning a gradual increase to approximately US\$ 17 by 2028, and reduced the limit for using carbon credits to offset the tax from 100pc to 50pc (América Economía, 2024; Delgado, 2025). As of 21 February, 2025, the government introduced an additional 1 percent tax on the sales value of fossil fuels until the end of the year (Reuters, 2025). The tax achieved a reduction of emissions:

“The 236 projects certified to offer credits in Colombia’s carbon market have reduced 231.29mn tCO₂e since 2002, according to Colombia’s carbon association Asocarbon. Another 167 mitigation efforts through the non-causation mechanism, that allowed entities to not pay the full tax in exchange for CO₂ reduction efforts, prevented the emission of another 116mn t CO₂e from 2017-2024”.

Delgado, 2025

A draft for a new mining law was elaborated by the Ministry of Mines and Energy following a broad 15 months social dialogue with unions and affected

territories. It was meant to correct all the aspects neglected by the prior law (Minenergía et al., 2024). The unions managed to include an article on the process of mine closures they had proposed (Interviewee 11). The most controversial content is the planned prohibition of all mining in marine and coastal areas, be it in the water body or on land (art. 22) and article 23, establishing the total prohibition of contracting for the exploration and exploitation of thermal coal (Minenergía et al., 2024, p. 20). At the end of March 2025, the government announced final consultations on the law before it would be introduced for discussion to parliament (Rodríguez M., 2025). However, in July the law had still not been introduced.

2.3.2 The Just Energy Transition Roadmap

The JET Roadmap “orients the social, ecological, economic and technological transformation, the transition from mainly fossil fuel based energy systems to those with a major protagonism of renewable energies” (Minenergía, 2023b, p. 6). Its construction was a complex process led by the Ministry of Mines and Energy, which provided a great body of studies across all aspects of the JET. After consultations with labour unions and companies of the energy and mining sector, indigenous, environmental and popular organizations, the Ministry elaborated the methodology for the JET Roadmap published at the end of 2022 and updated in 2023 (Minenergía, 2023c). It envisioned a democratic and participatory process with eight overarching actors: a) National government; b) Education and research system; c) Productive system (in general and of the energy sector); d) Institutional infrastructure, e) Territory and communities; f) Civil society organizations; g) Energy infrastructure and logistics; and h) Users (demand) (Minenergía, 2023a, p. 42). Unions were included in c, along with professional associations and representations from the entrepreneurial and industrial sector.

The “national dialogues” for the JET Roadmap in different regions of the country saw the participation of more than 2,000 social actors, including labour unions, the National Peasant Convention,

indigenous Wayuu Authorities, academia, youth, women, gender and diversity and civil society organizations. Territorial dialogues were held in La Guajira, in the Cesar Life Corridor (encompassing the five main mining departments), and in the Pacific region. Subsector dialogues were held for hydrocarbons, electric energy, renewable energy, and mining (Minenergía, 2025b, p. 5; Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 11). Union representatives participated in the different regional dialogues, and in a dozen union dialogues, in part organized by Sintraelecol and the Workers' Collective for the Just Transition, were attended by more than 250 workers, who discussed visions, impacts, obstacles, opportunities and proposals from their territories. The results were systematised and published (Minenergía 2024f). Based on the consultations and studies the Ministry of Mines and Energy elaborated a detailed analysis of socio-environmental opportunities and challenges of the JET (Minenergía 2024c).

A series of documents accompanied the roadmap construction. The implications for Colombia of the global tendencies of energy transition were analysed (Minenergía, 2023a) and updated (Minenergía, 2024b), followed by studies on the reindustrialization of the country (DNP, 2023), on the subnational energy potential and decarbonization opportunities in final energy uses (Minenergía, 2024e), on the investments needed for the JET (Minenergía, 2024a), and five sectorial analyses on a national strategy for cargo EV infrastructure (World Bank and Deloitte, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2025).

A first version of the JET Roadmap was presented in July 2023 (Minenergía, 2023b) and updated in 2024 (Minenergía, 2024c). Finally, all studies and the results from the social dialogues were combined to a 60 pages Executive Summary of Colombia's JET Roadmap (Minenergía, 2025). The Roadmap establishes a time line 2026–2050 regarding goals for installed capacity of the different renewable energy forms (Minenergía, 2025, pp. 36–38, 42).

In the electric energy sector, the JET follows four strategic orientations:

“(i) Energy democratization; (ii) Large-scale deployment; (iii) Stable energy; (iv) Market modernization. These lines respond to civil society demands and advance a diversified, decarbonized, and reliable matrix with the country’s well-being in mind”.

Minenergía, 2025, p. 34

The energy democratization includes energy access, territorial and community management of renewable energy sources and a regulatory framework based on tariff justice. The program “Colombia Solar” of the Ministry of Mines and Energy to install solar panels under community control is one of the centre pieces of the JET policies of the new government. It is directed towards the three lowest income classes in Colombia out of six. The three lower strata 1, 2 and 3 encompass about 72 per cent of the population. In some communities, wind turbines and small hydropower plants are installed. This marks a big difference with prior governments. An important challenge lies in the transition of the almost 1.7 million households with 5.3 million people that still use wood or other highly inefficient, unhealthy and contaminating fuels for cooking to the use of renewable energies (Minenergía, 2025, p. 45). “Colombia Solar” is part of the “Plan 6GW Plus” which aims at installing a minimum of 6GW new renewable energy generation (mainly solar and wind energy and small hydropower plants) from 2022 to August 2026 to significantly increase the share of renewable energies in the national energy matrix (UPME, 2025b) .

The electrification of the energy demand across all sectors connected to power generation through renewable energy sources is key to achieve a higher energy efficiency and decarbonization, and create new economic sectors. An efficient energy management “requires Colombia to move toward a multimodal, decarbonized, sustainable, and inclusive transportation system that includes the rail system, promotes the electromobility industry, and contributes to new economic and climate action schemes” (Minenergía, 2025, p. 43). In 2022 the

energy mix in transport was dominated by diesel with a 44 per cent share, followed by gasoline with 33 per cent, jet fuel 10 with per cent, ethanol and biodiesel with eight per cent, natural gas with four per cent and electricity and LPG with 0.1 per cent each. The JET Roadmap plans to reduce the use of non-renewable fuels in transport by 75 per cent until 2050 (Minenergía, 2025, p. 43).

Although the demand for electric energy is estimated to triple until 2050, Colombia could transition to an energy matrix from 100 per cent renewable energy sources by 2030 (Minenergía, 2025, p. 32). All renewable energy projects have a social and environmental focus, prioritizing social dialogue and human rights.

Among the new renewable energy sources identified as most relevant for an energy transition and industrialization are hydrogen, bioenergy, and sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) (Minenergía, 2025b, pp. 39–42). Hydrogen is important for the production of fertilizers, ammonia, methanol, steel, and SAF. Colombia is among the countries considered a potential producer and exporter of hydrogen. Although the government and most trade unionists interviewed assign to hydrogen an important role in the energy transition, the government maintains the importance of a critical view observing markets, prices and product tendencies. Hydrogen is considered an opportunity, but several obstacles are identified, as transport logistics and high fleeting costs (Minenergía, 2025b, p. 39). The hydrogen focus had already been established by the prior government in 2021. The Petro government intensified hydrogen production, which grew twelvefold between 2023 and 2024 to more than 400 tons. It is still almost all produced with natural gas. Ecopetrol began in 2024 to build the biggest green hydrogen plant in Latin America, which is to start producing some 800 t of green hydrogen annually in 2026 (Presidencia de Colombia, 2024). One preoccupation expressed by several interviewees is that hydrogen becomes the next extractivist activity.

The use of bioenergy, as gasification and co-combustion of biomass, cogeneration (heat

and power), anaerobic digestion gas, and the Organic Rankine Cycle (ORC), aims mainly at creating circular economies by energy or fuel production using byproducts from the same sector (Minenergía, 2025, p. 40). A palm oil industry unionist interviewed described how the plantation he works at has installed a plant to produce gas and then electric energy to cover its own energy consumption (Interview 4). Finally, Colombia has also a huge potential for geothermal power generation, using the heat from several volcanoes of the Central Mountain Range and sedimentary basins (Minenergía, 2025, p. 40).

The JET aims at reindustrialization of the country. The Roadmap points at the extraction of strategic minerals for the energy transition, mainly nickel (of which Colombia exported 38,000 t in 2021), copper and iron, but also other strategic minerals to be identified. It states that any exploration and exploitation should be done only in total respect for nature and life, under the control of a new state-owned company and guaranteeing the respect of human rights along the whole commodity chain (Minenergía, 2025, pp. 26–32).

New mining is a controversial issue. While most unionists and communities agree that energy and food sovereignty are crucial and there is a need for industrialization, many also express fears that the extractivist model in place is replicated with all its negative effects, and stress that Colombia's status as a mega-biodiverse country demands absolute rigor when dealing with extractive projects, in order not to endanger the biodiversity (Interviewee 3).

The comparison of the possible outcomes of the JET Roadmap orientations with the scenarios business as usual, the policies of former governments, the COP26 commitments, and the NDP 2022–2026, concludes that the actual scenario of the JET is the most ambitious and most solid of all these scenarios regarding industrial development, reindustrialization based on national production, and decarbonization (Minenergía, 2023b, p. 56).

The JET Roadmap also compares the necessary investments for the three different scenarios Business as Usual (BAU), Announced Policies (POL) and Just Energy Transition (JET) and estimates:

“In terms of investment for supply and demand, the BAU scenario requires between 6.8% and 8.5% of GDP. The POL scenario ranges from 7.3% to 9.2% of GDP. Meanwhile, with economic growth of 3%, the JET scenario requires between 7.5% and 10.3% of GDP”.

Minenergía, 2025, p. 50

Most investments are supposed to come from private companies, while households are meant to invest in the residential and transportation sectors. The government itself plans a variety of targeted and strategic investments in specific sectors (Minenergía, 2025, p. 50) and develops job reconversion programs, education, job training and support for new activities” (Minenergía, 2025, p. 56).

In October 2024 the Colombian government announced to set up a “Portfolio for Socio-Ecological Transition” for which it will seek to raise approximately \$40 billion in investments to finance the JET. As the Minister of environment announced, the aim is to use the funds for the “generation of other economic sectors that diversify the economy and reduce our dependence on oil and coal exports,” focusing on eco-tourism, sustainable production systems, low-carbon industries, and climate change adaptation. The portfolio has been presented at the COP and in other international arenas to gather support (AFP, 2024). At the end of September 2025, the government announced a 433 billion Colombian Peso (approx. US\$ 111.3 million) in JET energy transition projects in the “Corridor of Life,” which encompasses the five main mining departments in the Cesar region (Rivera, 2025). The investments are directed to 45 strategic projects for productive reconversion, health, road connectivity, basic sanitation, and environmental management identified in the regional and sectorial dialogues and aim at transforming the regional economy and overcome the dependency from coal. It is planned

to install an Interinstitutional and Social Roundtable to facilitate the participation of various social actors in the process, including state entities, communities, labour unions, academia, the private sector, and local authorities. To support a just transition and build a new economy, the government has also allocated \$2 billion Colombian Pesos (US\$ 515,000) for reskilling, job training and entrepreneurship in the “Corridor of Life”. In order to guarantee necessary funds, the Minister for Mines and Energy, Edwin Palma Egea, requested that the National Planning Department (DNP) includes the “Corredor of Life” in the longterm planing of the National Council for Economic and Social Policies (CONPES).

The installation of new renewable energy sources (mainly solar panels) reached 3.097 GW by Mid-September 2025, compared to the 2 GW originally planned in the NDP 2022-2026 and more than half of the six GW to be installed through the Plan 6GW Plus until August 2026. The clean energy share (without counting installed big hydropower plants) in the Colombian energy matrix increased from 2 per cent in 2022 to 13.87 percent in September 2025 (Review Energy, 2025).

The mobilization of sufficient funds remains a precarious issue due to the unforeseeable economic developments as the world market prices of Colombia’s export products and the oppositional economic boycott. Economic results are mixed. Inflation rate went down from 11.8 per cent in 2023 to an average of 4.9 for 2025 until September (Manrique, 2025). The total number of employed people increased 7.1 per cent between August 2022 and May 2025 (Sánchez, 2025). The unemployment rate fell from 11 per cent in January 2023 to 6.9 per cent in January 2025 and the monetary poverty rate fell from 36.6 per cent in 2022 to 31.8 per cent in 2024, which means a reduction of 1.2 million people (Manrique, 2025). But GDP growth has been much lower than the JET assumption of 3 per cent. In 2023 it grew only 0.7 per cent. It then accelerated to 1.7 per cent GDP growth in 2024 and 2.4 and 2.1 per cent in the first and second trimester 2025 (DANE, 2025), Petro himself acknowledged that it is still insufficient. As a consequence, public debt

is growing. The effects of the coal phase out are harsh. As Petro pointed out, “Coal extraction, after growing 7.8 per cent in 2021, fell 13 per cent in 2024 and 7 per cent so far in 2025” and generated already less foreign currency income than foreign tourism (Sánchez, 2025). In the context of the goal of food sovereignty it is notable that the agricultural sector has shown a much higher growth rate than its historical average.

2.3.3 Opposition to Climate and Energy Transition Policies by the political right and fossil fuel companies

From the outset, the climate and energy transition policies of the Petro government have been heavily under fire from most of the opposition parties, which are linked to the political and economic powers and interests that ruled Colombia until 2022 and worked to deepen the extractivist and dependent economic model. The opposition has blocked reforms of labour law, mining law, the healthcare system, and retirement schemes. It opposes a regulated JET to phase out coal mining faster, and has blocked a provision prohibiting new open-pit coal mines in the National Development Plan 2022–2026 (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 5) as well as the initiative to enshrine the fracking ban in law. In October 2024 the Chamber of Representatives approved a motion demanding to immediately resume signing exploration contracts for oil and gas (Gómez, 2024).

Employer, business and professional associations from oil, gas and energy sector are exercising pressure to increase oil and gas exploitation recurring also to fracking (Interview 3). The transnational mining companies did not comment on the just transition debate until the early 2020s. Then they began coopting the JT discourse, either to justify further coal mining as necessary to finance the JET, or by pointing at supposed “clean” coal mining (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, pp. 11–12). The companies are usually reluctant to talk about an end of operations, arguing that it would cause insecurity and anxiety among workers (Interviewee 1, 8). They continue to maintain a narrative that Colombia has enormous coal resources and there will always be countries to export to (Interviewee 1).

Mass media in Colombia is owned almost entirely by big business groups linked to the richest families and the former right-wing governments. It opposes all government policies and represents the interests of the fossil fuel companies. Unionists rely mainly on social media and alternative media for their debates and to spread information, which according to interviewees works well (Interviewees 5; 12).

Strong ties between the political administration and transnational fossil fuel companies, as well as corruption, manifest themselves especially at a local and regional level (Interviewees 3; 13). The economic dependence of local and regional governments in coal mining regions on the coal revenues causes them to defend the interests of the mining companies. Local and regional political leaders in La Guajira and Cesar support coal mining, arguing the revenues contribute to dynamizing other economic sectors and financing social programs (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 11).

Colombia’s party landscape is highly fragmented and the Petro government does not have a majority in the two chambers of the bicameral system. The different parties and party alliances supporting Petro have only 68 of 188 seats in the Chamber of Representatives. 37 seats belong to parties of the extreme right obstructing the government policies in general, such as Centro Democrático and Cambio Radical. 81 further MPs form an “independent” block including the former ruling parties Liberal Party, Conservative Party and the Party of the U of former President Juan Manuel Santos, which boycotts most government initiatives (Interviewee 3). Right-wing mayors of cities with a mass transport system rejected even the offer of the national government to cover 70 percent of the cost to switch to EVs, although this measure is rooted in the energy transition law 2169 sanctioned by the Duque government (Interviewee 2).

The opposition has engaged in what one interviewee called a “divestment, boycott and sanctions” campaign against the government (Interview 3). This boycott has an impact on the JET: Shrinking tax revenues and limited

possibilities of economic manoeuvring in scope and volume in favour of a transition limit the capacity of turning the government's discourse into practice (Interviewees 3; 6).

2.4 Labour unions: Repression, Fragmentation and Strategic Strongholds

Only 1.2 million workers, around four percent of the workforce, are union members (Alguero, 2024). This is due in part to the high informality. But Colombia is also among the ten deadliest countries in the world for unionists (CSI, 2023). Between 1 January 1971 and 17 November 2023, a total of 15,823 violations were committed against the life, freedom and integrity of trade union members, 3,328 of whom were killed (Toro Jiménez and Colorado López, 2024, p. 75). Along with peasants, indigenous people and environmental activists they are victims of killers financed by private capital and organized

crime, often with complicity of the army (Azzellini, 2009; Interviewee 6). Between 1987 to 2019 the USO suffered more than 125 killings of its members and more than 865 violent aggressions, displacing and driving into exile hundreds of union activists (Alcaraz and Rivera, 2024). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) ordered the Colombian state to safeguard all USO members and the USO. In early July 2025 the Colombian Attorney General's Office seized two Bogota offices belonging to the Anglo-French oil company Perenco, accused of financing a paramilitary group in northeastern Colombia between 1997 and 2005. Since 2023 there is also an ongoing trial against Drummond accused of financing paramilitaries to intimidate and kill Sintraminergética unionists (Hurtado, 2025, Interviewee 11). A Sintracarbón unionist sums up: "Anyone who speaks out against the interests of multinationals has a tombstone around the neck (Interviewee 5).



The killings of unionists have diminished over the past 15 years, mainly because unions are not the main obstacle for extractivist investments anymore. Of 181 social activists killed in 2024, 8 were unionists. Most victims belonged to land worker, indigenous, environmental and community organizations (Indepaz, 2025). Among the 21 trade unionists killed in 2022, two were affiliated with the USO and 13 belonged to Fecode (ENS, 2023). The Sintracarbón unionist interviewed reports that victims of terror started to appear again in La Guajira and they fear the reactivation of paramilitary terror against the communities could be part of a renewed political project of private capital (Interviewee 5).

The union landscape in Colombia is highly fragmented. There are 5,857 unions, of which less than 60% are considered to be active, while only 15 have more than 10,000 members and 4,862 unions have less than 100 (ENS, 2023). Most of them are company unions. There are three major union federations. The biggest is the Unitarian Central of Workers, CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores), with 546,000 members and a clear class and leftist political orientation. More than a quarter belong to the teachers union Fecode (ENS, 2023). All major unions of relevant sectors are affiliated with the CUT. The General Confederation of Work CGT (Confederación General de Trabajo) groups right-wing and liberal unions and has 122,000 members. The third federation is the liberal Confederation of Workers of Colombia, CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia), with its 51,000 members. The CUT unions are usually the only ones holding actual strike and negotiation power. Their high grade of organization, mobilization capacity and political experience turned the unions in a crucial support for Petro's electoral campaign.

Unionists see the fragmentation as a major obstacle in gaining more political weight. Building bigger unions according to branches has been a longtime goal. Several unions from the energy and mining sector have engaged since the mid-20st Century in attempts to build a unitarian union. Initiatives over the past two decades have enjoyed the support of

the CUT and IndustriAll. The Federación Sindical Minero Energética (FuntraMiexco) is the latest expression of these attempts. It unites the USO and unions of the coal (e.g. Sintramenergética) and chemical and gas sector (e.g. Sintrainquigas, Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Química, Agroquímica, Gases, Ramas Afines y Derivados). The goal of a unitarian union could not be achieved in the past because of controversies regarding the bureaucratic structure and distribution and ownership of assets (Interview 3).

2.5 The role of unions in climate policy making

The main labour unions in Colombia, as well as all interviewees, support the governments' climate policies and climate goals. The unions in sectors directly affected by the energy transition participate actively in public debates, build alliances and advance proposals regarding climate policies and the JET. To accompany and support Petro's "government of change" is considered a central task. Labour unions have gained

“very important positions from a technical perspective. ... Doors have been opened ... Sitting in a government office thinking about what to do, talking directly with technocrats, there's no precedent for that in Colombia. That was something important the workers won, and just as they saw that the door had been opened for them, they became ambitious”

Interviewee 7

While supporting the government policies the unions push their own agenda, advocating for a "transversalization of labour issues starting from environmental policies" (Interviewee 1). Beyond participating actively in the construction of the JET Roadmap, the labour movement has identified the legislative initiatives, instruments and policies of the government that it wants to influence, and focuses on them.

2.5.1 Labour Union Impact on Government Policies

Labour unions could include paragraphs concerning the JET and mine closures and several other labour unions' demands in the labour reform bill, although in the end not all managed to be part of the bill approved in June 2025. After the reform was blocked by the Senate, Petro announced a referendum on the reform, and all union federations and other organizations mobilized for mass protests (CUT, 2025). Finally the reform was approved with some concessions to opposition MPs. The law reverts the precarization and flexibilization of work enacted over the past 25 years and improves workers' rights. Several articles on just transition were approved and mine closures were regulated, but the mechanism for the creation of funds for social protection and economic diversification was eliminated. The same happened with the responsibility of employers to promote sustainability and sustainable work practices and with a detailed list of union rights. The unions consider the reform, nevertheless, an important step forward (Interviewee 1, personal communication July 1, 2025).

The miners' unions included provisions for obligatory closure plans and labour reconversion plans into the draft of the new mining law, ensuring that decent work rights are guaranteed. Labour unions are also advancing proposals for the decent work policy being drafted by the Ministry of Labor. Sintraelecol asked Cipame to elaborate a reform of the laws 142 and 143 from 1994 that regulate public power service and distribution (Ospina et al., 2025) (Interviewee 7).

2.5.2 Channels of Influence

Labour unions in Colombia have never before had such access to government institutions and MPs and possibilities of formal participation as they do with the Petro government. The access to direct communication channels with the government, however, is unequal. Some union sectors seem to have more access through informal channels, especially to the president directly (Interviewees 3; 9). Unionists criticize a lack of a systematic "construction methodology based on direct, productive, and useful dialogue" (Interviewee 3).

The access of unions to local authorities varies. Because of the economic importance of extractive activities for the specific territories and because of clientelist networks, local authorities mostly side with the transnational companies. The local authorities of the places affected by mine closures, however, had no other choice than to integrate themselves to the common debates and process with the national government, communities and unions (Interviewee 5).

The Labour unions use mainly six channels to influence the government's climate policy and the JET: Public statements, formal participation, informal consultation, legal means, collective bargaining and alliance building.

Public Statements

All labour unions analysed publish public statements in support of the climate policies of the Petro government, comment measures and make specific proposals regarding their sector, and they also release joint declarations among several unions (ILO, 2020; Cipame, 2021a; Sintraelecol, 2022).

Formal Participation and Informal Consultation

Beyond the participation in different dialogues for the JET Roadmap, the coal miners' unions gained direct access to the government under Petro's presidency. As a Sintracarbón unionist states: "The national government has always invited us ... and we don't have to pay anything out of our own pockets" (Interviewee 5). The first minister for energy and mining, Irene Vélez Torres, began early on in September 2022 sectorial meetings with energy and mining sector to discuss the Just Energy Transition and develop a Roadmap (Vélez Torres, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; Minenergía (Ministerio de Minas y Energía), 2022). Sintraelecol held four meetings with the new Minister for Mines and Energy and met twice with the President (Interviewee 12). The Ministry of Mines and Energy and the Ministry of Work have been very open to meetings and roundtables with unionists and promoted the common construction of alternative proposals from the territories. In the Guajira region, where workers were dismissed from El Cerrejón

mine, the government set up a round table with communities, unions and private companies with several specific commissions of social dialogue (Interviewee 1). The CUT coordinates with the Ministry of Mines and Energy, the Ministry of Work and the Ministry of Environment (Interviewee 6). The USO has also participated in meetings and talks with Ministries and government institutions, but also missed occasions to participate in government planning, as one USO interviewee points out (Interviewee 9). USO unionists, however, complain that Petro never had an in person meeting with the USO to discuss fracking, Ecopetrol and the JET (Interviewee 10).

Considering the importance of labour unions for Petro's electoral victory, unions and unionists expect generally a much closer relationship with the Petro government than there is. Union activists think that the Petro government should open to co-govern with the unions that supported Petro's election, as right-wing governments have been doing with entrepreneurs (Interviewee 7).

Another channel to bring the unions' point of view into government planning is through the "Roundtable for Coal to the Future" set up by the Ministry of Mines and Energy. Delegates of think tanks from different sectors (universities, environmentalists, vulnerable communities, engineers etc.) and those institutionally responsible for the phase out of the coal fired power plants discuss a phase out with energy security. Cipame has been regularly part of the roundtable: "We're like the technical voice of the workers at those meetings" (Interviewee 7).

Legal Instruments

Despite the volume reductions and mine closures, the mining companies decline to talk about a phase out, negotiate conditions of mine closure and take over responsibility for workers, communities or the environment (Interviewees 1; 5; 6). Glencore/Prodeco, for example, notified Sintracarbón that it will end operations in Colombia when the licenses run out in 2034. This means that around 12,000 workers of the mining company need new

economic activities and eventually reskilling over the coming nine years, but refuses to discuss mine closures (Interviewees 3; 5). The coal miners' unions therefore also use legal means with the Ministry of Labour and the courts to force the mining companies to assume responsibility. 17 unions, peasant and community organizations, among them Sintracarbón and Sintramienergética, in the region of the closed mines La Jagua and Calenturas sued Glencore demanding that the company comes up for compensations and reparations in a process defined by the participation of communities and workers (Interviewee 11; Mazo González, 2024). In February 2025 Colombia's Constitutional Court ordered Glencore subsidiary Prodeco to establish a round table for a social dialogue with communities, unions and authorities, in order to guarantee compensation measures and environmental and social recovery (Cipame, 2025). The coal miners' unions brought the cases of mine closure also to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). After the IACHR decided to manage the case in non-public audiences, the unions fight for a public process, so that the coal company and the responsible directors have to face the unions (Interviewee 11).

Collective bargaining

Union demands regarding a Just Energy Transition are entering most collective agreement negotiations. The list of demands presented by Sintracarbón to Glencore at Cerrejón includes a proposal for a just energy transition chapter. The unions at different Drummond operation sites set up a common list of claims including demands for communities and the restoration of nature. The different coal miners' unions are preparing a macro sectorial negotiation with all coal mining companies active in Colombia:

"The energy transition must meet the conditions we, as a union, have outlined. They can sit down with us to negotiate and establish them, or, failing that, a standard with this collective bargaining agreement for the issue of future mine closures that may occur here in Colombia has to be created".

Interviewee 11

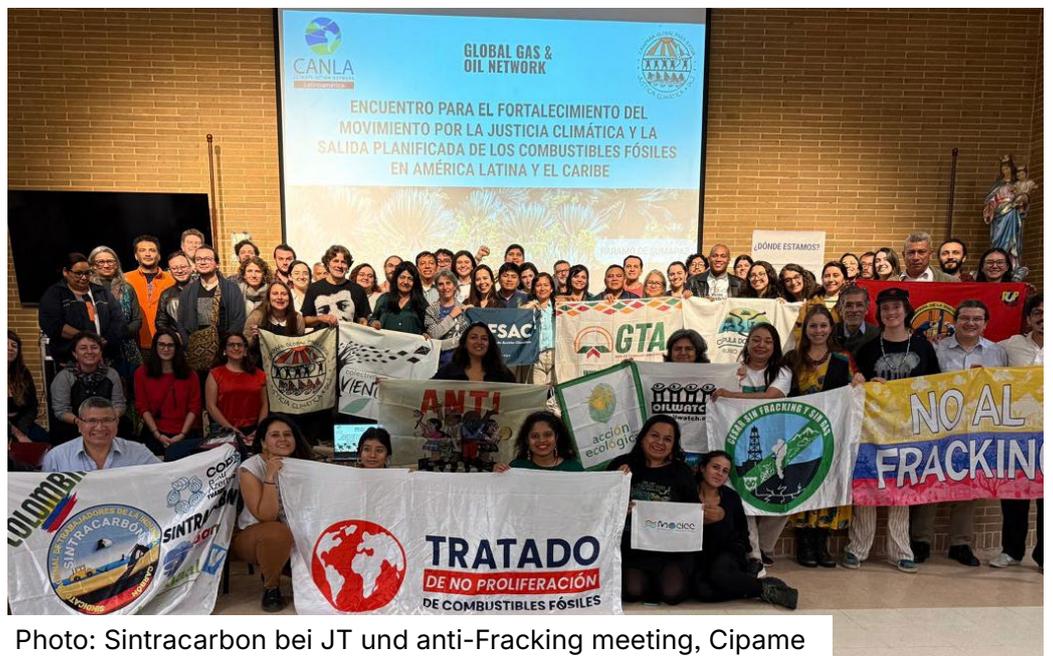


Photo: Sintracarbon bei JT und anti-Fracking meeting, Cipame

The last collective agreement negotiation of the USO was directly with the Minister of Labour representing the state-owned oil company Ecopetrol, and the Minister of Mines and Energy was present, to strengthen the USO (Interviewee 9).

Alliance Building

One strategy of labour unions in Colombia is to build alliances to fight for a public policy of Just Energy Transition. The main unions from the sectors mining (Sintracarbón) and energy (Sintraelecol), gas and chemicals (Sintrainquigas), oil (USO), transport (SNTT) and meanwhile also from the palm oil sector (Coordinadora Sindical Palmera) cooperate with each other in changing constellations to promote certain debates, laws, struggles etc. and develop common positions. They collaborate on JET issues. Some have built joint institutions (e.g. Cipame) or have joint initiatives to build branch unions and except the smaller coal miners' unions, they all convene in the CUT, which also supports the JET and unifies positions.

Labour unions cooperate also with social movement and elaborate joint proposals and projects for a just energy transition. The CUT and the main labour unions from the sectors oil, coal, energy, transport and palm oil industry participate in debates, common workshops, alliances for a just transition at a local, regional, and national level –especially in regions with extractive industries– with a huge

variety of social, political and economic forces. These include peasant, indigenous, Afro-Colombian and environmental organizations, academia, public institutions, entrepreneurs' associations, and NGOs such as Censat Agua Viva and Pensamiento Acción Social (PAS), that function also as think tanks and laboratories for the just transition and communities affected by dams, mining, oil spilling, fracking, solar and wind energy mega projects. All unionists interviewed report alliances and very good relations of mutual respect of their unions with environmental organizations, despite some differences (e.g. about the pace of the phase out or around a hydro power plant). Some unionists underline how the unions have learned from environmentalists and indigenous communities about the limits of nature and how the environmental, community and indigenous organizations have been the most important actor in limiting a further expansion of extractive industries (Interviewees 6; 12).

Several interviewees underline the importance of alliances with energy and mining unions and union institutions at an international level, as is the case with IndustriAll, to which the Colombian energy and mining unions are affiliated, and partner unions from other countries, like the IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie from Germany or the Christian Union Federation CNV from the Netherlands. This has helped to increase the pressure on transnational companies (Interviewees 1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11).



3. Labour's Just Transition debates and policies in Colombia

The labour unions in the sectors oil, coal and energy have been advocating for a **phase out of fossil fuel extraction and a just transition for more than two decades**, building alliances with environmental, indigenous and peasants' organizations, also advancing concrete proposals

(Avendaño, Soler and Torre, 2018; SANP and MSMEYA, 2018; Soler Villamizar, 2019).

The term and concept just transition is widely used in Colombia by labour unions, popular organizations and the government, with all the interviewees actively drawing on it. There is an ongoing broad public debate on just transition at different scales, and multiple actors from different sectors participate in it. The main unions from the mining and energy sector actively organize internal and public debates.

3.1 Labour Unions' Climate Positions and Demands

3.1.1 General Positions

The interviewed unionists, including of the health care workers' union Anthoc and of the teachers' union Fecode, expressed a deep concern about climate change and environmental destruction through fossil fuel extraction. However, in labour union from sectors that are not directly involved into the energy transition, climate change is not a relevant subject, neither of internal debates nor of education programs (Interviewees 13; 14). This became evident also during the present research. The interviewees from Antoch and Fecode, although aware of the effects of climate change and supporting the JET, showed limited concrete knowledge on climate policies and just transition. Unionists from directly involved sectors as mining, oil, energy, palm oil industry and transport underlined that they consider a socio-ecological transformation inevitable and that unions have to take over a leading role in modelling it:

“Sintracarbón is extremely aware and says, ‘Beyond the fact that our coal is being burned elsewhere, it’s our coal. Right? We’re the ones selling coal to the world, and that coal is what’s polluting everything.’”

Interviewee 7

“That coal continues to be burned in the world is a responsibility that neither we nor the national government want to assume.”

Interviewee 5

“The most advanced, most progressive union sectors, which fully understand the phenomenon of nature and its relationship with the capitalist mode of production, fully understand that this cannot continue.”

Interviewee 6

“It is a serious mistake to continue considering nature as something external. We cannot continue to consider nature as a commodity to be exploited, to be dominated and exploited, as if it were a basket of infinite resources or natural capital. Of course, this is a reality, and we understand that global society today has begun a structural debate around socio-ecological transformations and transformations related to energy, which compels us to take a political and institutional position, one that transcends primarily work ethics and projects what constitutes the energy transition.”

Interviewee 10



Photo: La Guajira, Juan Carlos Solano

In 2021 USO, Sintracarbón and Sintraelecol held two “Political meetings of mining and energy unity for the just transition in Colombia”, and published a joint statement that summarises well the position of the main unions:

“The undersigned organizations ... confirm our responsibility and commitment to promoting the current change in Colombia’s mining and energy policies and to changing the course of the exclusionary, unjust, and unsustainable development model, from an environmental, economic, and social perspective. This model is imposed by governments that serve financial capital and are purely extractive, centralizing mandates and ignoring the country’s diversity and regional needs.

In this context, we recognize ourselves as representatives of the working class present in the strategic mining and energy sectors, with a responsibility toward a sustainable environment, equitable economic development, and development with social justice. We carry the banner of a transition that is not only energy-related, but also just, with a territorial focus, seen from its complexity and diverse perspectives.

Faced with this irreversible need, environmental deterioration, and inevitable change in the energy mix, we declare our political and operational commitment to developing activities aimed at generating public policy proposals for a just transition for the country, based on independent research and training on the topic of just transition from the perspective of workers and taking into account the regions and all their stakeholders.”

Cipame, 2021a

Unions have come to the conclusion that they have to actively participate in the transition and work to strategically model it. Sintracarbón fights for a closure plan for coal mining that includes all aspects of a just transition with reparations and alternatives for workers, communities, territory and environment. Although Sintracarbón contemplates that the international context and Donald Trump’s

fossil fuel policy make it probable that coal mining might extend a few years more, it sees no alternative to the closure. Sintraelecol took the same decision when the gradual phase-out of coal fired power plants was announced. No union has demanded the continuation of operations or alternative solutions in the fossil fuel sector. Union activists in the coal sector are conscious that the energy transition and the end of coal mining and coal fired power plants are a reality and a necessity.

“At some point, we’re going to have to migrate. If we don’t do it voluntarily, in a concerted, and organized manner, circumstances will force us to migrate, and that would be even more critical.”

Interviewee 5

The unionists interviewed underlined all the strategic advantage of Colombia for the use of a broad variety of different renewable energy sources (Interviewee 3). Although they do not believe the narrative of a green capitalism:

“Everyone has something to lose in this equation, and it is necessary to assimilate that loss in order to adapt to it. Everyone must be willing to lose something. We do not buy the ILO’s idea that everyone will win here, that it’s a win-win situation, and that no one will end up unemployed, no one will end up closing their business and going bankrupt, no one will end up in a consumer society without having what they want. We’re all going to lose here, but the idea is to minimize those losses and adapt better.”

Interviewee 7

As one Sintracarbón unionist sums up:

“The energy transition will be for multinationals and the northern countries. And what’s left for us? Problems: environmental, labour, health, liabilities ... So, let’s not let those of us who made our share of sacrifice and brought wealth to the global North and beyond be affected in this process.”

Interviewee 5

3.1.2 Labour Union Positions and Demands for a Just Transition

Labour unions in Colombia see the energy transition as a chance for structural change. A just transition, from the union's point of view, means "a (re-) industrialization of the country aiming at achieving energy sovereignty, food sovereignty and water justice" (Interviewee 3), as one USO unionist sums up and unions declare as goals. Another USO unionist explains in line with the other interviewees and declarations from the various labour unions, the transition has to be just "for workers, for women workers, for communities, for all environments, for companies in the sector. A transition that is seen from a perspective of justice, from a perspective of equity, in environmental terms, in terms of labour, in terms of life, of well-being" (Interviewee 10). Edgar Mojica Vanegas, General Secretary of the CUT, states that the transition should not be in the hands of transnational companies turning it into a business. The CUT considers that Just Transition must have a social and community oriented focus, which "implies a profound debate on the public and the necessity to put the mining and energy sector under public control" (Nuñez, 2020, p. 30)

New mining of metals and minerals necessary for the energy transition is a controversial issue. While most unionists and communities agree that energy and food sovereignty are crucial and there is a need for industrialization, many also express fears that the extractivist model in place is replicated with all its negative effects, and stress that Colombia's status as a mega-biodiverse country demands absolute rigor when dealing with extractive projects, in order not to endanger the biodiversity (Interviewee 3).

In three workshops with different organizations and labour unions in La Guajira and in Cesar in 2023 the participants stressed the importance of a transition to a post-extractivist economic model – or it wouldn't be a just transition. Environmental, social and cultural reparations were deemed necessary not only in the direct areas of extraction but also in other affected territories, along the cargo train lines and the shipping locations (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, pp. 13–15)

As the Cipame researcher reports, the understanding of just transition is one of a structural change:

"We've developed new definitions with communities and workers. It has to be a transformative transition and a managed transition. ... It has to be at the level of changing the economic system, changing the political system, and also changing class relations between workers and employers. But that also includes other things like overcoming poverty, a gender perspective, and differential approaches. ... It has to be done in phases, coordinated, planned, and hand in hand with all the actors involved in the transition. ... The social responsibility of the state and the guilt of employers, of companies... These are the first two major actors who must take responsibility for addressing the impacts on workers in the face of climate change. And another is that a just transition cannot be an excuse for job losses, but rather, on the contrary, to empower them."

Interviewee 7

Labour union positions in this regard can be divided up into more general positions and demands and concrete demands. Many of the labour union positions, and contents of the JET supported by labour unions, have already been mentioned. All unionists argue that the destructive exploitation model and the inequality in the country have their origin in the capitalist mode of production and imperialist domination. A Just Transition therefore includes overcoming the North-South dependency and the role as resource supplier.

"We really need to raise awareness, that we are indeed affecting the planet, we are affecting the sources, we are affecting an entire society. Because if an oil company is in a certain sector of the country and social progress and growth in the communities were seen, one would say, "Okay, that's great," but the truth is, it's not visible. Capital takes all the profits. It takes absolutely everything. So, we prefer to finally materialize the vision and the energy transition project as soon as possible."

Interviewee 10

A central demand is that a just energy transition must be led by the state and state companies. In this context they demand also to regain state control over resources and state companies such as Ecopetrol. All interviewed unionists and researchers agree that the whole energy and mining sector should be under state control. As the CUT unionist comments:

“In the current state of affairs ... there may be a transition, but not a just one. ... Capitalism can take on the task of changing the energy matrix, but in the end, it doesn’t do so on the basis of taking workers into account, by any means. It may resolve part of the contradiction it has with nature, but when it comes to labour, it will always maintain the same refusal to recognize that worker. ... That’s why the role of the state here is key.”

Interviewee 6

Energy Democracy is another central demand of labour unions and also a declared goal of the JET. It means equal access to financially affordable electric power and decentralization and community control of energy production. As a USO unionist from Barrancabermeja argues:

“There’s a dam half an hour away, and we don’t get a single kilowatt-hour of energy. But there’s a dam that generates 900 megawatts, and a refinery. We absorb all the pollution, and we pay the most expensive gallon of gasoline in the country and the most expensive kilowatt-hour in the country. So, the question arises: Who is the transition for? That’s what we believe in: it must be comprehensive, broad, but prioritize the rights of communities.”

Interviewee 9

Labour is obviously the key issue in union debates and at the centre of the unions’ concrete demands and proposals, as the labour unions consider that they have to safeguard the livelihoods of workers and communities. Their approach, however, is territorial.

The labour unions consider social dialogue among workers, local communities, private companies

and the state a condition for a just transition. All interviewed unionists and researchers express their concern that solar and wind energy parks need much fewer workers than the extractive industries and that the work conditions in the solar and wind energy sector are precarious, usually without stable contracts and with a lower income than in the fossil fuel sector. They consider the new labour activities have to be “safe, dignified, environmentally clean and transparent” (Interviewee 11).

From the view of workers and communities, the transnational companies

“have to take responsibility for the environment, they have to take responsibility for the already affected health of workers and for the communities. They also have to take responsibility ... for reactivating the economic value chain, and they also have to take responsibility for something super abstract, which is cultural. That is, the rupture of the social fabric, the fact that people have left and abandoned their rituals, all of this.”

Interviewee 7

The coal miners’ unions of the Workers’ Collective for a Just Transition elaborated four principles that are central in order to turn the energy transition into a Just Transition for coal miners, their communities, and the coal mining areas:

- a. **Social dialogue** (freedom of association and effective participation of workers)
- b. **Social protection** (create a social protection fund for miners)
- c. **Economic diversification** (Create an economic fund for diversification, focus on green jobs)
- d. **Job retraining** (recognize that the mining activity was encouraged by a neoliberal government and create a retraining strategy). (Interviewee 1).

These demands can be considered central to the labour unions in the energy and mining sector and are repeated in union documents, joint declarations with other unions and social movements and negotiations, as well as by the interviewees (Cipame, 2021a, 2021b; IndustriALL, 2025; Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 15; Sintraelecol, 2022). Especially for the coal miners, health is an important issue and they need an ongoing social protection. The Sintracarbón unionist points out the high rate of workers with health problems, which affect 745 out of 3,500 miners in La Guajira (Interviewee 5).

Moreover, all interviewees consider a fund to finance the transition as necessary, to which especially the transnational extractive companies should contribute to, as well as international funds from the global North and funds from the state. There should be no job losses, and all workers that don't fall under early retirement schemes, have to be reskilled. This implies also the economic revitalization of the extractive territories. In the labour unions' understanding, this entails much more than just compensation payments for the workers, as often proposed by companies. The state directed the economic activity of these formerly agricultural areas towards mining and has therefore to take responsibility to redirect and reorganize a local economy (Interviewee 1; 3; 5; 7; 8).

This is not an easy task. In coal mining an operator of heavy machinery earns around six million Pesos monthly (ca. €1,400), while the minimum income as agricultural worker is 1,300,000 Pesos, and in the service sector in La Guajira salaries are even lower than the minimum income (Interviewee 5).

What is remarkable, is that the interviewed unionists recognize that workers transitioning from the fossil fuel industries to other branches will in most cases earn less, simply because the income levels of the fossil fuel industry are unlikely to be achieved in most other jobs.

“There's the issue of awareness that we must raise among workers. Mining isn't the same as agriculture, livestock, or industry. And you'll never

earn the same because the work we're going to do will never have the same output.”

Interviewee 5

On 1 May 2025, the four coal mining unions—Sintracarbón, Sintramienergetica, Sintradrummond, and Sintradem—presented a comprehensive proposal to initiate negotiations on the phase-out of coal. Grounded in the labour rights enshrined in the Constitution and national labour law, they called for collective bargaining at the sectoral level.

The proposal encompasses workforce retraining, economic diversification, and cooperative production projects framed from a gender and care perspective; measures for social and economic protection; labour and trade union guarantees for current and former workers; limitations on outsourcing and protections for subcontracted workers; provisions for compensation, support, and community development; land redistribution and socio-environmental measures; and, finally, mechanisms for coordination with public policies and among state institutions, including the allocation of responsibilities to various ministries and the National Mining Agency (ANM) (CTTEJ, 2025).

The proposal was submitted to all coal mining companies as well as to the Ministries of Mines and Energy, Labour, Agriculture and Rural Development, and Environment and Sustainable Development. The unions proposed the establishment of a roundtable for negotiations. While the government expressed its willingness to participate, private mining companies rejected the initiative and declined to engage in dialogue with the unions.

In response, the unions reaffirmed their demands as a constitutionally and legally grounded initiative for sector-wide collective bargaining on a just transition away from coal mining. They argue that this initiative is therefore legally binding for employers and seek to compel mining companies—through legal and political means—to enter into collective negotiations with both the unions and the government (personal communication, Interviewee 5, 17 February 2026).

3.2 Just transition activities and initiatives

The CUT and Sintraelec affiliated already in 2012 with the global network Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), the SNTT followed. During many years the debate on just transition was mainly pushed by labour unions, indigenous and community organizations, academia and environmental NGOs. Just energy transition was the central topic at the Round Table Mining, Energy, and Environment for Peace (MSMEYA) of social organizations, founded in 2016 around the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC guerrilla. The round table discussed strategies, and elaborated a proposal for a just energy and mining transition vs. the dominant “corporate transition.” The MSMEYA was founded following the Second Assembly for Peace convened by the USO, Ecopetrol and the Ministry of Work which gathered labour unions and territorial ethnic and environmental organizations. In 2018 they all participated in a National Dialogue on Mining, Energy and Environment which saw the participation of social movements and labour unions, among them also the CUT, USO, Sintracarbón, Sintraelec, and some minor unions from power distribution services and extractive industries. They presented 21 proposals regarding mining and energy. (SANP and MSMEYA, 2018).

The commitment of the Petro government to a just transition has opened the possibility for an inclusive and participatory debate on concrete just transition strategies and policies.

Several social movement networks and territorial alliances have provided spaces for debates, expressed opinions, raised demands and mobilized for their goals. Regional alliances among indigenous communities, environmental movements and unions against fracking and against mega wind energy parks exist in Cesar, La Guajira and the Caribbean region, while others are nationwide groups. In the regions affected by coal mine closures community and indigenous organizations organize to debate the consequences as well as the risk of new mining projects. Universities and think tanks have

supported them with research, job retraining and making contact with government institutions. In some cases, however, local communities have complained that their interests were not taken into consideration (Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 12).

In La Guajira (the peninsula in the Northeast close to Venezuela), indigenous Wayúu communities oppose wind energy parks on land and offshore that are damaging the ecosystems and displacing communities (Grattan, 2025; Interviewee 12). Moreover, the planned installation of 2,800 wind turbines in the region raises concerns about how it will influence winds and temperatures, affecting the regional climate (Interviewee 5). In this context the government identified pressure on indigenous communities in La Guajira by authorities and transnational companies regarding land use for renewable energy generation mega projects and concluded that this shows the importance of better planning, “understanding the social, economic, environmental and cultural context” and a “social dialogue prior to the execution of the projects” (Minenergía, 2025, p. 33), in order to avoid injustices and the disrespect of indigenous groups.

3.2.1 Just Transition Union Activities

The Example of Sintracarbón and Glencore

When Glencore/Prodeco closed the mines La Jagua and Calenturas and laid off 7,000 workers in February 2021, a shock wave went through the unions of the mining and energy sector, which suddenly realized that phasing out of coal mining would be happening much faster than anyone had thought. Mine closures are only poorly regulated in the mining legislation and a few additional ecological norms for mining. No frames existed that guarantee solid financial responsibilities of the mining companies regarding short and long term consequences of mining, there is not even a clear regulation how to evaluate the impacts of mining for the environment and affected communities (CAV-ADT, 2022, p. 10; Pardo Becerra et al., 2021b, p. 14).

“The strategy that worked for multinational companies here is to give up their mining rights. They don’t close the mine, but rather resign

before the contract ends. This has consequences because it's much more economical for them, as they don't have to close the hole. They resign early, and this has benefits because in Colombia, there's no legislation governing mine closures from a labour and environmental perspective.”

Interview 1

On 23 February 2021, the Cerrejón coal mine in the department La Guajira, owned by Glencore, BHP and Anglo American, laid off 450 workers (IndustriALL, 2021), justifying the move with reference to the low world market price for coal (Interview 1). El Cerrejón is the biggest open pit coal mine in Latin America and represents 45 per cent of the GDP of the La Guajira department (Rubio, 2025). The ecological devastation it caused is immense. 21 km of the river Bruno had to be deviated because the coal is mainly situated under the river bed. Communities have denounced that 16 bodies of water in the department have been severely affected by mining (CAV-ADT, 2022a). Sintracarbón has a long lasting and intense cooperation with local communities and environmental groups. In fact, the workers do not see themselves as separated from these communities, but rather primarily as their members: “The first thing we have to keep in mind is that before we are workers, even before we wear this uniform, we are a community out there” (Interviewee 5). Sintracarbón has always opposed the deviation of the river Bruno although it meant future job losses. Sintracarbón has received the support of surrounding communities in its labour struggles and strikes, which lasted up to 91 days (Interviewee 7). The ties of the union with local communities are strong, and whenever Sintracarbón faces mine closures, they work on common demands of workers and communities (Interviewee 1).

Sintracarbón, supported by the technical expertise of Cipame, organized a series of workshops with more than 120 Cerrejón workers and representatives of surrounding communities, to elaborate an own JET agenda and program facing the mine closure. The first step was to elaborate a common definition among workers and communities of a just energy

transition. It was followed by outlining the main issues in addressing the closure plan and the actions to be taken, and the Cipame analysed the skills and interests of the workers to plan alternative economic activities. The detailed investigation on skills and interests orients the development of reskilling and cooperative proposals (Interviewee 7).

The Workers' Collective for a Just Transition

The mine closure and the layoffs were an alarm signal for the coal miners' unions. The situation required a collective union narrative and strategy regarding a just transition from the labour point of view (from an ecological point of view it already existed). In 2020 the two major coal miners' unions Sintracarbón and Sintramienenergetica, both affiliated to the CUT, the minoritarian and formerly more company friendly unions Sintracerejón and Sintradrummond, and the union of ill and disabled coal miners, Sintradem, formed the Workers' Collective for a Just Transition, with the support of the Dutch trade union organization CNV Internationaal. The goals were to build a common narrative on the energy transition from the workers' point of view, support the dismissed 7,000 Prodeco workers to relocate or retrain, and develop sustainable work alternatives in the territory. The collective serves also as a space for discussion and training for the politically diverse unions, to coordinate struggles and demands, and act together in political and legal matters. The collective has also met and discussed energy transition with palm industry unions and unions from the sugar cane industry and from banana plantations. (Interviewees 1; 5; 11)

Cipame – Research for a Just Energy Transition from the Workers Point of View

The Innovation and Research Centre for the Just Development of the Colombian Mining and Energy Sector Cipame was officially launched in May 2022 by the USO, Sintracarbón and Sintraelec. They saw the need for a research institute that produces research and knowledge for a just energy transition from a workers' point of view, and can help develop public alternative proposals to be presented to the national government. The Cipame

engages in research to “strengthen diagnostics, characterizations, and the presentation of proposals” (Interviewee 3), providing data, analysis and proposals in line with the unions’ interests. Cipame is

“conceived as a research, development, and innovation centre because its purpose is to create knowledge for workers. But it’s also to generate processes, to generate developments that give workers the opportunity to decide on the country’s productive forces or means of production and directly enter into conflict with big capital, starting with knowledge management and ending—which is where the greatest challenge of all lies—in the country’s reindustrialization, influencing the technologies that are applied here, but also the manner and conditions under which these begin to be developed in Colombia. It’s a bit of a quest for sovereignty, especially in energy, and all under the idea of defending a just energy transition.

The Cipame has a very strong political component ... we have several strong components: research, development, and innovation, advocacy, and also training and education, capacity building... Training is not only conceived from an ideological and training perspective. We feel it’s essential to fill it with content, especially when talking about a just transition. Because that concept must be defined by and for workers ... Everything related to job and productive retraining is fundamental.”

Interviewee 7

Although a founding member, the USO has still not committed completely to Cipame, but collaborates with it. Sintraelec and Sintracarbón are on the directors’ board. The palm industry union coordination CSPMM and the transport union SNTT have also begun collaborating closely with the Cipame, recognizing it as the most competent authority regarding a just transition from a workers’ point of view. The Cipame has supported them with expertise regarding energy transition, workshops and webinars, contacts with government authorities and legal advice (Interviewees 2, 4). Together with the CSPMM it is also looking at solutions for energetic self-sufficiency of the palm oil industry

and possibilities of work alternatives for former fossil fuel workers (Interviewee 4).

Retraining and reskilling

The unions also aim at establishing

“a comprehensive agenda for training, capacity building, and the provision of trainers of trainers to bring the proposals, possibilities, disputes, and tensions revolving around this debate on energy transition to every corner of factories, unions, and businesses. Above all, we can raise awareness among workers and communities surrounding fossil fuel extraction sites about the urgent need to move toward a horizon of a fair, planned, orderly, and democratically agreed-upon energy transition over the next 20 years.”

Interviewee 3

The oil workers union USO demands reskilling programs for workers in the energy sector, to allow them to requalify for work in “green sectors”. It has negotiated relocation or retraining agreements for employees and achieved to include reskilling and job training obligations for the companies in collective agreements. The last contract negotiations 2023-2026 between the USO and Ecopetrol included debates and agreements on company support for “investment projects, productive economy pilot projects, creation of non-oil-economy jobs in oil-producing territories” and an entire chapter on Just Energy Transition, which Ecopetrol rejected. The USO and Ecopetrol, however, agreed on an energy transition forum to be held at the national level, which is planned for 2025. With the non-oil-economy productive projects that the USO is developing with communities, it aims at a cultural transformation (Interviewee 3, 10).

Retraining and new jobs are more pressing in the coal sector, in which mass dismissals are already happening and extraction levels are falling. Labour unions demand reskilling offers and their funding from their companies. Generally, they defend that it should be primarily the state that organizes the job reskilling and training with the company resources,

own resources and resources from international funds against climate change.

“A concept of what is fair requires that there be an economic fund that cannot come solely from the shoulders of workers, but must come from the contribution of the national, departmental and municipal governments, but there must be a significant contribution from the companies in the mining and energy sector. And very especially from the transnational companies and the governments of the northern states that have enjoyed the energy that has been provided to them through the non-renewable fossil fuels that we have extracted during the last few years.”

Interviewee 3

Labour unions also contribute with their own training centres and aim at broadening their own offer, train workers in building cooperatives, and are in the process of building a workers' university. The USO training institute Aury Sara Marrugo Corporation started a pilot project in the La Guajira region with a Spanish organization to retrain and incorporate former coal workers into wind and solar energy projects to benefit food production and food sovereignty projects (Interviewee 3). However, it is seen as a duty of the state to offer job training at all levels, from public schools to universities, offering job training in, e.g., the renewable and alternative energy sector, just as it did when the extractive industries were introduced and expanded. For that the National Learning Service (SENA), which has a structure covering huge parts of the national territory, must be strengthened (Interviewee 3). The SENA of Barrancabermeja and the SENA of Barranquilla built already training schools for solar panel maintenance technicians, and in Barranquilla they also added a program to train solar panel construction technicians. In La Guajira, SENA, together with various ministries and the unions, set up a round table on job retraining and protection of the local workforce (Interviewee 4).

Retraining is not even a need for everyone. Technology and experience from the hydrocarbon

industry can be put to use for exploring and developing geothermal power generation (Minenergía, 2025, p. 40). As the Sintracarbón unionists point out, among the 3,500 direct workers of the Cerrejón mine there is a vast potential of skills. Many workers operate machinery that can build roads, others handle trains or operate a port. “We need to redirect all our potential to the different sectors where we're needed” (Interviewee 5).

The Cipame, Transforma and the Workers' Collective for a Just Transition offer job trainings in solar panel installation and maintenance and on small hydropower plants for workers from coal mines and coal fired power plants, evaluate their skills and support the creation of cooperatives. Some cooperatives of former coal workers in the renewable energy and technological sector were founded, others, also in the agrarian sector, are being developed. The unions promote and develop cooperatives for the dismissed fossil fuel workers. The cooperatives are not only thought as alternative to the lost jobs in the fossil fuel sector, they are also seen as being in line with the idea to build a different economic model.



Photo: La Guajira, Juan Carlos Solano

The University of the Magdalena in Santa Marta developed in cooperation with the Workers' Collective for a Just Transition and with various think tanks a six-months-long 180 hours diploma on job reconversion and economic diversification dealing also with technical, legal, social and geographical aspects for Prodeco workers and community members in César. The same diploma was offered organized by Sintracarbón in La Guajira. The diploma has the goal to support former coal miners and surrounding communities in developing job alternatives.

In Santa Marta-Ciénaga, the diploma led to the founding of the cooperative Coomustier by 22 former workers from the energy and mining sector (CNV Internationaal, 2023, 2025b). Moreover, the cooperative members participated in a technical training course on the installation and maintenance of solar panel offered by the university, and in courses on solidarity economy and technical aspects of solar power generations with the state vocational training program SENA successfully.

The Coomustier cooperative, established in 2023 by diploma graduates, provides solar and electrical system installation and maintenance, B2B technical services, training, and project development (CNV Internationaal, 2023). It is one of four cooperatives supported by the WCJT, which offers legal assistance, institutional backing, and access to vocational training and employment networks.

Among the technical service and renewable energy installation cooperatives originating from the diploma program in Cesar is also Asoextramicer (Asociación de Exabajadores Mineros del Cesar), which has 104 members and was founded by affiliates of Sintracarbón formerly employed in Prodeco mines. Another initiative is Asoenergy (Asociación de Energías Renovables del Cesar), established by affiliates of Sintradrummond. Asoenergy focuses on the installation and maintenance of non-conventional renewable energy systems, provides vocational retraining for former mine workers and community members, and supports the development of community-based projects and new cooperatives. It also promotes

environmental management practices and submits proposals related to mine closure processes in the department of Cesar. Furthermore, Asoenergy offers out-of-court conciliation services in the municipality of Chiriguaná to address conflicts and contribute to social stability and peace. (CNV Internationaal, 2025a, no date; Vega-Araújo et al., 2025).

In the department of Norte de Santander, workers from the coal-fired thermoelectric power plant Termotasajero in Cúcuta established the cooperative Atjuns (Asociación para el Desarrollo de una Transición Energética Justa desde el Norte de Santander), with support from Cipame. Atjuns promotes energy community initiatives by assisting rural and low-income urban communities in installing collectively managed solar panel systems. It provides training for both community members and the local workforce in clean energy projects across the department. Additionally, Atjuns organizes dialogues and workshops with hydrocarbon workers and communities in Tibú to collaboratively plan a gradual transition from an oil-dependent economy toward sustainable employment alternatives.

Cipame also supports a cooperative of former female miners and women community activists that adopts an ecofeminist perspective.

Coal unions rely on a network of think tanks, institutions, and organizations that support job training and skills development. In La Jagua, the National Council of Electrical Technicians (CONTE) offers training courses focused on regulatory and legal frameworks, complementing the ongoing basic electricity and solar panel training programs provided by SENA for members of Asoextramicer, Asoextramin, and surrounding communities. This initiative is further supported by the Ministry of Mines and Energy and Cipame.

Mango Mag, another cooperative promoted by Sintracarbón in the department of Magdalena and founded by 17 former coal miners, is engaged in the cultivation and processing of mangoes. The project aims not only to capitalize on local agricultural

resources but also to implement circular economy principles and environmentally sustainable practices, including the use of biodegradable packaging and the reuse of organic waste. Its products include mango marmalade and mango liqueur (Interviewees 1 and 5).

Within the framework of the declared objective of achieving food sovereignty and revitalizing local economies, agriculture—including value-added processing—has emerged as a reskilling pathway. This orientation is particularly significant given that many mining regions were historically agricultural areas prior to the expansion of coal extraction.

Asoextramin (Asociación de Extrabajadores Mineros), founded by 35 former workers of Prodeco affiliated with Sintramienergética, promotes sustainable agricultural development. The cooperative aims to foster economic and social transformation in the departments of Cesar and Magdalena by providing skills training in a range of agricultural activities for former miners and vulnerable communities. Its training programs include the management of agricultural and livestock production projects as well as sustainable waste management practices. In addition, Asoextramin promotes environmental remediation initiatives, such as the reforestation of land degraded by coal mining. (CNV Internationaal, no date).

The Workers' Collective for a Just Transition has also developed a project to establish an agricultural cooperative dedicated to cultivating fique, an aloe plant used for the production of natural fibers and textiles similar to sisal. Fique is also utilized in the manufacture of organic insecticides, alcohol, shampoo, and other personal care products. The project envisions not only primary production but also the downstream processing of fique within the cooperative structure, thereby increasing local value creation. Initially, the initiative sought to secure 10 hectares of land and involve a limited number of families. With the support of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), however, the proposal expanded significantly to encompass a cooperative of approximately 700

families requesting 10,000 hectares. Backed by the Ministry of Mines and Energy, coal workers' unions have sought land allocations from the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, aiming to obtain between 2,000 and 4,000 hectares as well as financial support to launch the cooperative. To date, however, the land has not been assigned and financial assistance has not been disbursed to the workers at a meaningful scale (Interviewee 11).

Sintracarbón continues to develop proposals for new cooperatives and engages with government authorities to assess their feasibility and secure institutional support (Interviewee 5). The promotion of cooperatives and the provision of training on their establishment and management are regarded as central components of just transition strategies. Beyond directly affected workers, unions emphasize the need to address the broader—predominantly female—care economy that has developed around coal mining activities.

Trade unions stress that sectors such as healthcare, childcare, and food provision must be systematically integrated into just transition frameworks. The government is reportedly preparing new regulations on job reconversion with a strong gender focus (Interviewee 1); however, as of early 2026, no formal proposal had yet been presented. In this context, the demands articulated by coal unions in their sectoral collective bargaining proposal with the government and private companies on a just transition are regarded by labour organizations and progressive actors as the primary point of reference and as a guiding framework for governmental action (CTTEJ, 2025). Coal mining unions explicitly frame job retraining, economic diversification, and cooperative production initiatives through a gender- and care-centred lens.

Article 14 of the proposal stipulates that “employers and the Government shall finance a comprehensive and differentiated study on the impacts that mine closures will have on men, women, and individuals belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. The study must identify gender gaps, structural inequalities, and the specific needs of each group in order to

design appropriate mitigation measures and to support the implementation of workforce retraining and productive diversification initiatives” (CTTEJ, 2025, p. 12)

Article 15 establishes that employers and the government are required to “create and finance childcare centres, centres for the elderly, and centres for persons with disabilities,” ensuring the participation of caregivers in their design and implementation. These centres must provide “high-quality services with flexible hours that enable caregivers to reconcile work, personal, and family responsibilities” and aim to “reduce the caregiving burden that disproportionately falls on women, thereby facilitating their access to the labour market, participation in educational programmes, and economic empowerment” (CTTEJ, 2025, p. 13).

Article 16 stipulates that

“employers and the government, in consultation with labour unions, shall design and implement labour retraining programmes with a gender focus that take into account the specific needs and aspirations of women workers in mining complexes, as well as women engaged in informal employment in sectors economically dependent on the consumption patterns of direct coal mining workers.”

CTTEJ, 2025, p. 13

The training programmes shall include:

- Training in non-traditional sectors with high labour demand;
- Vocational guidance and job placement support;
- Measures to eliminate barriers that hinder women’s access to training and employment in non-traditional sectors; and
- Leadership and empowerment training to promote women’s participation in decision-making processes. (CTTEJ, 2025, p. 13).

Article 17 obliges employers, the government, and trade unions “to guarantee the effective and equitable participation of women in the social dialogue spaces” established under the sectoral framework agreement. To this end, it mandates the introduction of minimum quotas to ensure women’s representation in all decision-making bodies; the provision of specialized leadership and negotiation training for female workers; the systematic incorporation of a gender perspective into all “discussions, decisions, and policies derived from this agreement”; and the assurance of “safe and discrimination-free work environments,” thereby “promoting equal opportunities for women’s professional development.” (CTTEJ, 2025, p. 13).

Promoting Decent Work

The USO, Sintracarbón, Sintraelecol, SNTT and the Coordinadora Sindical Palmera have a shared agenda for advocacy on various public policy issues to advance the defence of decent work (Restrepo et al., 2022). As the reform of the Mining Law did not move forward, and some relevant issues did not make it into the final version of the Labour Law Reform, the unions in the coal mining sector opted for an alternative strategy, pushing their demands for further guarantees for the workers in case of mine closures and layoffs through the National Council for Economic and Social Policies (CONPES) in a draft decree on decent work, including the regulation of the workforce transition issue, which was to be released at the end of 2025 (Interviewee 1, personal communication July 1, 2025). CONPES (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social) is the highest national planning authority and serves as an advisory body to the government on all aspects related to the country’s economic and social development. It defines and promotes strategic national orientations through design, guidelines and the review and approval of documents on the development of general policies that are presented at sessions for review and approval (e.g. the annual macroeconomic planning, the National Development Plan etc.). Inclusion into the CONPES guarantees interinstitutional support and the necessary financial resources. The CONPES is presided by the President of the

Republic and encompasses all Ministers and the directors of several state institutions. The National Planning Department (DNP) serves as the Executive Secretariat of CONPES, responsible for ensuring compliance. It is a guide to actions with timelines and commitments from the ministries, a sort of non-legal commitment (for 10 years) that has always been fulfilled by varying governments. (Interviewee 1, personal communication July 1, 2025). However, in early 2026 the decree had still not been presented.

Working with Communities

Labour unions in the energy and mining sector often negotiate extra funds for community projects with the companies they work at. They support community-level energy transition initiatives seeking to reduce the carbon footprint. In the case of Sintraelecól:

“We’ve established some work through community actions. First, regarding education, and second, direct community engagement. The community joins working groups, to have a first-hand experience, go to the point where the bidirectional meter will be connected to connect their solar panels, and to be the ones to install them themselves. We’re training them for this, and the community will be given funding so they can take part in this. ... The problem isn’t installing the solar panels or installing the wind or offshore energy, since we have a generator here. The problem is maintenance, and they must take care of that. Because it’s the only way we’ve found, because the state is spending 1.2 trillion pesos [approx. US\$300 million, author’s note] for strata one, two, and special zones.”

Interviewee 12

The alliances also aim at giving the communities that depend on or are affected by extractive activities a voice at the governmental and company level.

“The USO reaches out to the territories. It speaks to the communities ... in search of basic needs, of the environmental impacts the oil industry has had on the sector, conditions, labour needs, lack of water, and contamination in water sources, to

be able to have a direct relationship with Ecopetrol and the communities. ...

Alliances between unions, environmental organizations, and communities seek to pressure current governments and companies to commit to the needs of the territories and, of course, to the issue of a just transition. These coalitions have sought to balance social justice with environmental goals by demanding emissions reductions, but without doing so at the expense of jobs and community well-being.”

Interviewee 10

A similar practice is described by the Sintraminenergetica unionist (Interviewee 11).

3.3 The contestation of climate action and Just Transition within the labour movement

Some minor right-wing and yellow unions oppose the government’s climate policies and the JET. As is the case with the CGT affiliated right-wing oil and energy workers union Utipec (Unión de Trabajadores de la Industria Petrolera y Energética de Colombia) with some 1,000 members (ILO, 2020). It advocates for the continuation of the extractivist economic model and an increase of oil exploitation. It denounces indigenous and community protests, opposes strongly the USO, and rejected the labour law reform as a “Marxist reform” (Utipec, 2025). Their opposition is practically irrelevant. It serves only as propaganda tool for the transnational companies and the far right.

All major unions in the sectors directly involved in the JET have adopted official positions in support of the government’s climate policies and the JET. However, differences inside labour unions and among workers regarding the JET exist also in Colombia, although “no one disagrees with the energy transition. Our disagreements lie in how and when to implement this energy transition” (Interviewee 3). In part, it is also the uncertainty about the path forward that raises doubts among

workers (Interviewees 6; 12). The interviewees differentiate between disagreements caused by lack of interest or knowledge and political differences.

Different political actors within the unions have different visions of how they conceive the development of the state, society, and the economy, and how they understand the dynamics of the energy transition, leading to different priorities and varying temporalities. A typical argument is to support the increase of the oil and gas extraction rate to mitigate job losses and investment losses in the extractive sector, including extraction in new regions or at new depths and fracking.

The most obvious divisions are in the oil workers union USO. In November 2019 the USO National Delegates Conference, the union's highest authority, voted almost unanimously in favour of a fracking ban and a law prohibiting fracking. In 2021 the USO joined the social and environmental anti-fracking movement alliance Colombia Free of Fracking (Colombia libre de fracking, 2021). Opposing its own rank and file and highest organ, the USO national leadership in 2024 made a call to continue fracking in Colombia, and in 2025 it criticized Petro for asking that Ecopetrol should end its involvement in fracking operations in the USA (Gómez, 2024). The reasons for dissent vary. Some USO unionists changed their opinion because with a progressive government they see a possibility to use the revenues from the fossil fuel sector for urgently needed investments - a position that the mid-level representatives in the different regions, who are more aware of the concrete local circumstances than the leadership in Bogotá, don't support. Many of them belong to a major political current in the USO linked to the Congreso de los Pueblos, a national network and alliance of social movements and environmental, indigenous, popular and peasant organizations and unions. It advocates against fracking and for an orderly and planned phase out of fossil fuels exploitation and consumption as fast as possible (Interviewees 3; 9; 10). As one USO delegate explains:

“We had sufficient empirical evidence, and we also had studies from different universities that showed that, in terms of the cost-benefit ratio, there was very little left for the country, and the social, ecological, and environmental debt was very high in relation to the economic gains that this exploitation model was leaving us. That's why the delegates and directors who come from the regions and territories have a more radical position regarding the extractive model than the national Board of Directors itself, which may be monitoring politics and macropolitics, which may be in centres of power like Bogotá or the Congress of the Republic, or in certain international centres, but which don't necessarily have that appreciation and that appropriation of the harmful effects that the development of the industry has had on the territory.”

Interviewee 3

Another USO worker adds:

“The workers who have felt harmed by the environmental issue and who are aware of it are in the territories where they exploit and produce. ... The issue of war, the issue of territory, that has also allowed them to have a much broader vision and perspective of what the energy transition is all about, and to defend the environment, the soil, nature, species, everything.”

Interviewee 10

The contradiction is currently blocking the USO from working together and developing a politically more effective struggle (Interviewee 10). A Cipame researcher attributes divisions in the USO to a lack of internal political and technical debate on transitioning out of oil production and the refusal to adopt the narrative that fossil fuel extraction has to and will end at a certain point, an impasse that the coal miners' unions have overcome already (Interviewee 7).

Several interviewees point out that the mid- and higher ranks of the unions are well aware of climate change and the environmental urgency. But that among the rank-and-file coal miners and also

in some communities depending on their work, the knowledge about climate change and the consciousness regarding the necessary phase-out of fossil fuels is not equally widespread and firm (Interviewees 1; 5; 6; 7; 8). As one Sintraelec unionist describes it:

“Of the 100% of Sintraelec-affiliated workers, which number around 9,000, 60% are knowledgeable about the topic. Of that 60%, half understand it, the other half are familiar with it. And of that 30%, half, or 15%, understand it, comprehend it, and explain it, in other words, they educate. The rest? 40% of that 100% are simply not interested at all.”

Interviewee 12

To overcome a possible resistance from within against the energy transition, unions from the mining and energy sector have been organizing internal workshops and debates with their rank & file on climate change, global political economy and renewable energies, working to build their own narratives.

3.4 What Does Just Transition Mean in Colombia?

The Duque government’s concept of just transition was limited to the workforce transitioning to other jobs (Gobierno de Colombia, 2020). Colombian labour unions have always rejected this interpretation, and defend a holistic concept of just transition with a much wider scope. Although the concept of socio-ecological transition pursued by unions in Colombia is framed as (Just) Energy Transition, it is in fact a broad transition, including aspects from energy democracy to ecological and territorial justice. It envisions a structural transformation of the national economy and regional economies. In the understanding of the labour unions, social movements and other popular forces, as of the Petro government, the JET has to contribute to closing social and economic gaps which would result in major reforms, such as an agrarian reform, labour law reform, healthcare reform and other reforms.

“Although the transition process requires a significant technological shift in energy production methods, a Just Energy Transition is not limited to this area; it includes additional economic, social, and environmental variables that guarantee justice in its implementation.”

Minenergía, 2025, p. 16

To summarise the findings using the analytical framework of scale, scope and depth proposed by Stevis and Felli (Stevis and Felli, 2020): Colombia’s JET is multi-scalar, it unfolds on the local, regional and national scale. The scope of the JET is broad. It is participatory and aims at the inclusion of poor, remote, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, gender and workers, although labour unions and social and popular movements claim more direct participation. Regarding the depth of the JET, we have to differentiate between the envisioned depth and the actual depth.

The envisioned depth is far reaching and structural: the JET aims not only at changing the energy matrix but also at overcoming the extractivist economy and the relation of dependence from the global North, industrializing the country, and reducing inequality. However, the strong political and economic opposition has made it difficult for the Petro government to institutionalize many of the JET policies and has blocked broader law reforms considered crucial for the goals of the JET. Therefore, it is unclear how deep-seated the JET policies are. Their continuation will broadly depend on the outcome of the next presidential election mid-2026.

4. Conclusion



Photo: Treffen der Frauen in Energiegewerkschaften, Cipame 2024

Socio-ecological transition in Colombia has primarily been framed as an energy transition. Initial policy discussions emerged under right-wing governments, driven by the material impacts of climate change - particularly the increasing unreliability of hydropower generation - as well as by structural pressures such as declining global demand for coal and the country's limited proven oil reserves.

With the election of President Gustavo Petro in 2022, the transition was explicitly reframed as a Just Energy Transition (JET). The Petro administration announced a halt to new oil and gas exploration and drilling licenses, prohibited fracking and new coal mining projects, and mandated the transformation of the state-owned company Ecopetrol from a fossil fuel enterprise into a diversified energy company with an expanding renewable energy portfolio.

Within this framework, the socio-ecological transition is conceived not merely as an environmental imperative but as an opportunity for reindustrialization and structural transformation. It seeks to overcome Colombia's historically subordinate role as a primary commodity exporter to the Global North—a position that has entrenched economic dependency and technological asymmetries. The JET agenda therefore encompasses energy democratization and aims at transforming the export-oriented extractivist development model, while addressing persistent social and economic inequalities.

A central pillar of energy democratization is a programme enabling communities to install, maintain, and manage their own renewable electricity generation systems. By promoting decentralized and collectively administered energy production, the initiative aspires to expand access, strengthen local capacities, and redistribute economic benefits.

The Petro government has pursued a broad and participatory consultation process in developing the JET roadmap, involving a wide range of stakeholders, social organizations, and labour unions. Although Colombia's overall trade union density remains low—largely due to more than a century of systematic repression—unions retain significant influence in strategic sectors central to the JET, including coal mining, oil and gas, electricity, and transport.

Trade unions in the fossil fuel sectors have traditionally maintained strong relationships with local communities, Indigenous and peasant

organizations, social movements, and environmental groups. For several decades, they have advocated a gradual phase-out of fossil fuels, criticizing the environmental degradation, external dependency, and extractivist economic model associated with the sector. They have further linked this model to deepening socio-economic inequality and to the structural conditions underpinning armed violence in the country.

According to the JET framework, the phase-out of coal mining is envisaged by both the government and trade unions to be completed by 2034, when the last existing mining licenses are set to expire. Coal-fired power plants are expected to be decommissioned no later than 2035. Oil and gas exports are to be progressively reduced, while remaining oil production is intended to support the development of a domestic petrochemical and pharmaceutical industry, with the overarching objective of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

Renewable energy is being intensively promoted, and all renewable energy projects are formally required to incorporate social and environmental safeguards, prioritizing social dialogue and human rights. Colombia could potentially generate 100 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, although electricity demand is projected to triple by 2050. The use of non-renewable fuels in transport is expected to decline by 75 per cent by mid-century. Among the renewable energy sources identified as particularly strategic for both the energy transition and reindustrialization are hydrogen, bioenergy, and sustainable aviation fuel (SAF).

The principal labour unions in Colombia broadly support the government's climate policies and the JET agenda. Under the administration of President Gustavo Petro, unions have gained unprecedented access to government institutions and decision-making arenas. Trade unions in strategic sectors—including coal mining, oil and gas, electricity, and transport—which supported Petro's electoral campaign, have taken advantage of this political opening to advance proposals, policy initiatives, and draft legislation proposals related to the JET.



Coal mining unions in particular have assumed a prominent and influential role. Although they had long advocated a gradual phase-out of coal, they were confronted in the early 2020s with abrupt mine closures and large-scale dismissals. The absence of adequate mine closure regulations and just transition measures—for workers, communities, the environment, and local and regional economies heavily dependent on coal revenues (in some departments between 50 and 70 per cent)—prompted the main coal mining unions to fully embrace the phase-out and actively shape its terms. They formed a strong alliance, developed common positions, and coordinated joint initiatives for a just transition.

These unions collaborate with organizations in the energy, transport, and palm oil sectors. Several unions jointly established the research and training centre Cipame, which develops analyses and policy proposals from a workers' perspective. At the same time, the oil workers' union Unión Sindical Obrera (USO)—historically a national reference point in struggles for a just transition—has experienced internal divisions. A significant faction supports continued oil extraction and even fracking during the transition as a means of financing it. These internal tensions have constrained the union's policy influence.

Despite these challenges, labour unions exercise notable influence over government climate policies and the construction of the JET. They do so through public statements, participation in formal governmental bodies, informal consultations, alliance-building, and protest mobilizations. They have succeeded in incorporating key labour-related demands into labour law reforms and broader policy orientations. Additionally, unions make strategic use of collective bargaining and litigation—both domestically and internationally—particularly in disputes with mining companies.

While there is strong commitment among the Petro administration, labour unions, and numerous regional and local social organizations to advance a just energy transition, a comprehensive long-term governmental roadmap remains lacking. This absence risks neglecting the so-called energy trilemma—the need to balance energy security, equity, and environmental sustainability during rapid transitions (Interviewee 7). Developing a coherent long-term plan is further complicated by financial uncertainty and sustained political opposition that impedes institutional consolidation. Many of the measures adopted thus far remain government policies rather than fully institutionalized state policies. Interviewed unionists and researchers alike express concern that a future right-wing administration could reverse key achievements.

Following President Petro's announcement of a fossil fuel phase-out, a ban on fracking, and the suspension of new oil and gas exploration licenses, international credit rating agencies downgraded Colombia's rating, resulting in higher borrowing costs. This has increased interest payments on existing debt and raised the cost of new loans, which are crucial for financing the JET. The government's lack of a stable majority in the bicameral legislature has placed both the administration and the union movement under sustained pressure from right-wing opposition parties and allied business and media actors, who have sought to block or dilute major reforms and climate policies. In response, trade unions, together with government and allied movements,

have pursued a dual strategy combining institutional policymaking with mass mobilization.

Labour unions broadly endorse the government's plans for socio-ecological transition and reindustrialization but insist on safeguarding workers' and communities' interests. They support the strategic orientation of aligning renewable energy expansion with national development goals. At the same time, they warn that large-scale wind and solar parks, hydrogen projects, and the extraction of critical minerals for the JET risk reproducing extractivist patterns under the control of large domestic capital or foreign investors. Consistent with their vision of a more egalitarian, collective, sustainable and territorially grounded development model, unions—particularly in the coal sector—promote the creation of workers' cooperatives and invest in reskilling and vocational training to support cooperative enterprises.

Nonetheless, unions also criticize the government and call for deeper institutional engagement in favour of a transformation. They point in particular to shortcomings in education policy at all levels, including vocational training, and to the absence of comprehensive agrarian and rural reform necessary to strengthen agricultural production and advance food sovereignty (Interviewees 3; 5). Researchers further highlight coordination problems among ministries and across levels of government as a factor slowing policy implementation (Interviewees 7; 8; Vega-Araújo et al., 2024, p. 11). Unionists less directly involved in governmental negotiations tend to attribute limited progress to insufficient follow-up on adopted laws and measures, whereas those engaged in policy processes emphasize the multilevel resistance of opposition parties and powerful economic actors as the principal obstacle (Interview 3).

The strong focus on energy transition has also led to the relative neglect of other critical policy areas in both public debate and practice. Responsibility for directing the JET has been assigned to the Ministry of Mines and Energy, an institution not primarily oriented toward labour conditions. Yet workers' health in Colombia is increasingly affected

by climate change, including exposure to extreme heat and cold, without receiving adequate public attention (Interviewee 7). Similarly, land-use change—the principal source of greenhouse gas emissions in Colombia—has been sidelined in the broader transition discourse.

Despite these challenges, Colombia's Just Energy Transition represents one of the most ambitious contemporary projects of socio-ecological transformation. Its scope and depth are closely linked to the sustained engagement of trade unions and social and popular movements, combined with the election of a progressive government. The Petro administration and the Colombian labour movement are actively seeking to consolidate and institutionalize the JET through legislative, regulatory, and participatory mechanisms, complemented by mass mobilization to counter opposition. They have achieved notable advances in a nationally and internationally adverse context. The future trajectory of the JET will depend significantly on the electoral outcomes of mid-2026 and on the continued capacity of trade unions and social movements to exert pressure on any incoming government.

Elections in March 2026

Colombia elected a new Congress on March 8. With an electoral participation rate of 50 per cent (21 million voters), the governing party Pacto Histórico received 4.4 million votes for the Senate (22.72 per cent, compared to 2.9 million and 17 per cent in 2022). Pacto Histórico increased its seats in the Senate from 20 to 25 and together with its coalition partners, it now holds 37 out of 103 seats, three more than in the 2022 elections. Although Pacto Histórico and its partners did not achieve a majority, the gains of Pacto Histórico are highly significant in a context in which all major media outlets and the national bourgeoisie oppose the government, and the Trump administration has openly threatened Colombia with military intervention.

Interviews

Interview 1. Consultant, Workers' collective for the Just Transition (Colectivo de Trabajadores para la Transición Justa). 5 February 2025.

Interview 2. Unionist, transport worker union SNTT (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Rama del Servicio de Industria, Transporte y Logística de Colombia). 14 February 2025.

Interview 3. Unionist, oil workers union USO (Unión Sindical Obrera) and representative of the energy union federation FuntraMiexco (Federación Sindical Minero Energética de Colombia). 24 February 2025.

Interview 4. Unionist, palm industry union of the Miid-Magdalena CSPMM (Coordinadora Sindical Palmera del Magdalena Medio). 18 February 2025.

Interview 5. Unionist, coal miners' union Sintracarbón (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria del Carbon). 6 February 2025.

Interview 6. Unionist, umbrella union Unitarian Central of Workers CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores). 11 February 2025.

Interview 7. Researcher, Innovation and Research Centre for the Just Development of the Colombian Mining and Energy, Cipame (Centro de Innovación e Investigación para el Desarrollo Justo del Sector Minero Energético de Colombia). 12 February 2025.

Interview 8. Researcher, Climate Policy Research Centre Transforma. 11 February 2025.

Interview 9. Unionist, USO and FuntraMiexco. 5 February 2025.

Interview 10. Unionist, USO. 11 February 2025.

Interview 11. Unionist, National Union of Mining, Petrochemical, Agrofuel and Energy Workers Sintraminenergetica (Sindicato Nacional de los Trabajadores Mineros, Petroquimicos, Agrocombustibles y Energeticos). 21 February 2025.

Interview 12. Unionist, electric energy workers' union Sintraelec (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Energía de Colombia). 6 February 2025.

Interview 13. Unionist, teachers' union Fecode (Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación). 12 February 2025.

Interview 14. Unionist, healthcare worker union ANTHOC (Asociación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores y Servidores Públicos de la Salud, Seguridad Social Integral y Servicios Complementarios de Colombia). 6 February 2025.

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This project focuses on studying **Just Transitions** by comparing concepts, policies, and strategies across 14 diverse countries to ensure a **socially just shift towards decarbonisation**. It aims to develop recommendations for climate-friendly structural changes that protect workers and vulnerable groups. The project is funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation – Just Transition: Aktivitäten im internationalen Vergleich 2021-582-2.

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Find out more

Visit the website (<https://justtransition.leeds.ac.uk>) for further information about this project, including full case study reports, podcast episodes, and articles.

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