

# **Towards Energy Democracy**

**Discussions and outcomes from  
an international workshop**

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# 1. Energy democracy: blueprint, process, or fantasy?

Energy has always been a terrain of struggle, with practices of energy usage, distribution and production shaped by ongoing processes of social and political contestation. Larry Lohmann and Nick Hildyard (2014), researchers with The Cornerhouse, have shown that this is true of the very concept of “energy”. Energy, they argue, tends to be understood as an abstract concept referring to a quantifiable and singular substance, detached from any kind of social or ecological relations. Yet this concept of energy is not a universal given. Rather, it emerged out of the development of fossil-fuelled industrial capitalism and, hence, has always served certain elite interests. Thinking of energy in this way, argue Hildyard and Lohmann, can easily render the question of low-carbon energy transition as a question of how fossil fuels might be replaced with equivalent units of “clean” energy, in order to maintain the status quo. But other ways of thinking about, producing and using energy are possible. It is to this task that this report directs its attention.

From energy access to climate justice and from anti-privatisation to workers’ rights, people across the world are taking back power over the energy sector, kicking-back against the rule of the market and reimagining how energy might be produced, distributed and used. For many (but not all) movements involved in struggles around energy, the concept of *energy democracy* is proving increasingly useful as a means of bringing together disparate but clearly linked causes under a shared discourse and, possibly, something of a common agenda.

There is no singular understanding of the call for energy democracy. The term clearly evokes a desire for collective control over the energy sector, counterposed with the dominant neoliberal culture of marketisation, individualisation and corporate control. Energy democracy is concerned with

shifting power over all aspects of the sector – from production to distribution and supply, from finance to technology and knowledge – to energy users and workers. Movements deploying the concept of energy democracy also demand a socially just energy system, meaning universal access, fair prices and secure, unionised and well-paid jobs. They want an energy system that works in the public interest, with the profit motive giving way to social and environmental goals. And they seek a transition from high to low carbon energy sources, ultimately meaning a world powered by 100 per cent renewable energy.

On this basis, there have been various attempts to offer a tight definition of energy democracy, for instance by the German climate justice movement and the Trade Unions for Energy

Democracy alliance (Angel, 2016). Their definitions provide a seeming blueprint for a future energy sector: a sector powered by renewables, controlled collectively, with an ethos of social justice and oriented towards the public interest.

There are certainly good reasons to undertake the task of a shared definition: this offers a clear direction of travel for struggle, as well as a framework for critiquing endeavours that use the term in diluted or co-opted ways. Yet there

*“Energy is a very valuable commodity, but access to energy should also be a human right. If we simply run it for profit it will be impossible to use it to meet people’s needs. If you add into the equation the fact that corporations are trashing the planet and destroying our environment, it’s then pretty clear that we need a massive transformation of the global energy system. If we’re going to meet social needs and protect our planet we need to actually take it out of the hands of those who are simply trying to run it to make more money”.*

**Nick Dearden (Global Justice Now)**

are, perhaps, some limitations of thinking about energy democracy as a well-defined end goal to be realised in the future. For political theorist Timothy Mitchell (2011), the imperialist imposition of the Western ideal of liberal democracy on the rest of the world has been enabled by an understanding of democracy as a pre-designed set of principles and structures, to be exported around the world regardless of historical and geographical context. When thinking about democracy with regard to energy, we must avoid fetishising concepts in this way, acknowledging that what works in the rural areas of Laos will likely be very different to what works in the city of London.

Indeed, while the concept of energy democracy has gained significant purchase in debates across Western Europe and the US, it has thus far had little usage or relevance in the Global South, where ideas of energy sovereignty and energy justice have been more prevalent. There is, then, a real risk that energy democracy becomes a Eurocentric agenda. In response, any attempt to push ideas of energy democracy on the Global South by European activists must very clearly be avoided. Instead, the question to ask is how the energy democracy imaginary can be made relevant to the questions and priorities of struggles in the Global South, so that those who deploy the concept can cultivate solidarity, and so that the concept can be rendered more useful to southern struggles, should southern activists decide that they want to explore ways of using or adapting it.

Activists in Europe and the US can similarly enrich their struggles by learning from and deepening their understanding of the framings of energy justice and energy sovereignty used in the Global South.

For activist and researcher Kolya Abramsky, energy democracy – understood as an abstract vision of a future energy sector – is “a fantasy”. The existing balance of power under neoliberal capitalism is profoundly anti-democratic. Thus, any kind of emancipatory energy transition would require a fundamental transformation of the existing geometries of power – and, as such, would demand a concrete and ambitious political strategy for how this kind of transformation might be achieved. Therefore, we might wonder whether the more pressing question is not the precise details of what a future energy utopia might look like but, rather, how we might build collective power and organisation.

If we want to foreground these political questions, it might be more productive to conceive of energy democracy as an ongoing process of democratisation. Seen this way, energy democracy becomes the question of how we might go about organising to craft a more socially just, sustainable and collectively controlled energy arrangements, within the historical and geographical circumstances we inhabit.

Conceived as such, energy democracy is not a future utopia to be won but, rather, is itself an ongoing struggle or, perhaps more precisely, an ongoing series of multiple struggles over who owns and controls energy and how, where and for whom energy is produced and consumed.

It is, perhaps, through a fluid movement and ongoing conversation between these diverging understandings of energy democracy – as blueprint and as process – that progress can be made. For just as struggles need to be guided by an idea of what kind of energy sector we want, a detailed vision of a future

sector is no use without concrete strategies for how this future might be won. In this spirit, this report will oscillate between these different questions, contributing to debates around what we ought to be fighting for and how our fights might be won.

## 2. Energy democracy and the city

With the majority of the world's population now living in cities, the urban scale is increasingly touted as a key arena for action on climate change and sustainability transitions. Indeed, the city is emerging as an important space

*“If we're not explicit about saying ‘we want an energy system that is beyond neoliberalism’, then we're going to continue operating on the same playing field. Then we will go for the easiest options, we will go for what seems to get investment. There's always a big question: How do we get investment for offshore wind? How can we get investment for solar panels? If we don't think of what are actually the political structures that we are creating when we install solar panels and when we source the investment, then we end up remain trapped in the neoliberal space”.*

**Mika Minio-Palluelo (Platform London)**

for the enactment of energy democracy. The creation of publicly-owned municipal energy utilities is a key cornerstone of the political agenda implemented by citizens' platforms who have risen to municipal governance in Spain. The municipal schemes now being devised will have a wide array of interesting experiences to draw upon from elsewhere.

Nick Buxton, from the Transnational Institute, explained that despite the dominance and power of investor-owned utilities in the United States, about 40 million people are served by municipally owned public utilities or electricity coops. And in many cities without public utilities, there is a growing demand for more democratically-accountable and renewable energy focused utilities that is posing a strong political challenge to privatised energy. Among other initiatives:

- The *New York Energy Democracy Alliance* brings together several grassroots and community organisations to contest the city's new Energy Vision, aiming to stop a scheme that purports to promote decentralised solar yet hands control over to private utility companies. Instead, the alliance calls for democratic public control, community participation and measures to ensure social justice, demanding that no New Yorker pays over 6 per cent of their income on energy.
- In 2011, the residents of Boulder, Colorado voted in favour of the city breaking its ties with private company Xcel and creating its own, democratically accountable, public utility. In a classic David vs Goliath battle, youth-led organisation New Era Colorado were able to defeat Xcel – who spent \$1 million on their oppositional campaign. But despite this original success – and another defeat for Xcel in a subsequent legal challenge – Xcel refuse to give up and are exploring further legal methods to block the new public utility.
- The *Our Power* campaign spans across six cities – San Antonio, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; Eastern Kentucky, Kentucky; Black Mesa, Arizona; Detroit, Michigan; and Richmond, California – demanding a just transition to a democratic clean energy economy. The campaign partners with trade unions, indigenous groups and others working for racial justice and social justice and integrates the call for energy democracy with the desire for control over land, water and food.

A similar spirit of urban energy democracy is also evident in Europe. In Berlin, the *Berliner Energietisch* brought together an alliance of over fifty groups –

from environmentalists to housing groups – to force a referendum on their demands for the remunicipalisation of the distribution grid, and the creation of a democratic energy utility company. Stefan Taschner, spokesperson for the campaign, explained that the initiative was grounded on three fundamental principles:

1. *Clean energy*: the company should be powered by 100 per cent renewable energy.
2. *Social justice*: the company should be committed to affordable tariffs and tackling energy poverty.
3. *Democracy*: the company should be owned by the local state but controlled via participatory democracy, through: i) elected citizen board members; ii) advisory neighbourhood assemblies; iii) total transparency; iv) the chance to petition the board to take into consideration matters of widespread public concern.

Although the campaign achieved the remarkable feat of collecting the 200,000 paper petition signatories necessary to force the referendum, and went on to win an 83 per cent majority – over 600,000 votes – it was narrowly defeated by

a failure to reach voter quorum by just 21,000 votes. This defeat came about at the hands of the local state government, which moved the date of the referendum away from the general election to an isolated day, in order to undermine turnout. The campaign, however, was in many ways highly successful. For one thing, it forced the local state into a concession – the establishment of a small-scale clean energy utility – and, moreover, substantially raised the profile of energy democracy issues in the city and beyond.

*“We see public municipal energy as a way of addressing the challenge of scale in energy democracy. There is a lot of optimism for communities trying to take back their own power through small renewable installations. But that's tiny, and the challenges of decarbonising and providing affordable energy are huge. So, we see municipal energy as something that can bridge that gap between the really massive challenges and the kind of small-scale and decentralised responses”.*

**Anna Galkina (Switched on London)**

Indeed, exchanges with the Berliner Energietisch campaigners were highly influential in the decision of activists in London – including Platform, Fuel Poverty Action and Global Justice Now, as well as major trade unions such as Unison and the Public

and Commercial Services union – to launch *Switched On London*, a new campaign for a democratic public energy utility. Switched On London has emerged in the context of increasing interest in municipal energy initiatives in the United Kingdom (UK), with the cities of Nottingham and Bristol recently setting up their own public supply companies to serve as affordable and clean alternatives to the private sector.

In London, the Greater London Authority is pushing ahead a public-private partnership with RWE nPower, which aims to supply large institutional consumers such as the Underground and the police with local low-carbon energy. Switched On London are critical of this scheme's lack of ambition in terms of low-carbon transition and energy poverty, as well as the fact that RWE will profit at the taxpayers' expense. Indeed, cities are beginning to engage in similar public-private energy partnerships across the UK, risking the co-optation of the municipal energy agenda. Part of the thinking behind Switched On London is to push emerging municipal energy initiatives in a more progressive direction – ones that are ambitious on clean energy transition and energy poverty, fully public and controlled democratically and do not partner with the private sector.

Switched On London's demands draw heavily on the Berliner Energietisch's proposal, including its proposed democratic governance for the utility. Unlike the Energietisch, though, Switched On London's focus is solely on the creation of a new utility company, without a concrete proposal for how the city's distribution network might be re-municipalised. While the Energietisch exploited a window of opportunity opened by the expiry of the city's distribution network contract with Vattenfall; in the UK network contracts are not franchised, making buying back the grid more difficult. Further, Switched On London is unable to force a citizens' referendum and, as such, will have to find alternative forms of leverage. They began building pressure in the run-up to the London Mayoral elections in May 2016, using this political spectacle as a means of building a public profile and introducing the idea of a democratic public energy utility into the public discourse.

The campaign helped push the Green Party into supporting the idea of a publicly owned energy company to drive low-carbon investment and cut Londoners fuel bills, although the Greens were quiet on the question of the company's democratic governance. Meanwhile, Labour Party mayoral candidate (and eventual elected mayor) Sadiq Khan pledged to establish a publicly-owned company to boost new energy generating capacity, while remaining ambiguous on the question of whether this company would commit to tackling energy poverty by offering affordable energy supply to London households. Switched On London intend to keep campaigning, putting pressure on local politicians while building further alliances and supporters, connecting with other struggles across the city.

As with the nation state, attempts to craft emancipatory energy transitions in the city are riddled with complexities and contradictions. Municipal governments are, of course, part of the state and, as such, constituted through the same processes of struggle and contestation (see section 3). Thus, as much as endeavours to build urban energy democracy have garnered impressive popular support and forced significant concessions from the local state, urban energy struggles have also met with strong resistance from both the state and private capital, from Boulder to Berlin.

There is, though, good reason to keep pursuing energy democracy in our cities. For one thing, the scale of the urban makes sense, being close enough to local communities to remain accountable, without risking becoming too big to control, as has happened with state utilities such as Eskom in South Africa and Vattenfall in Sweden. Further, impressive alliance-building in Berlin and London suggests that the city might be a fruitful site for the formation of productive solidarities between struggles. While urbanisation has always played a pivotal role in capitalist development, cities have also been central sites of resistance and progressive alternatives. This has, perhaps, never been truer than it is today. Whether through movements fighting gentrification, struggles for affordable housing and transport, or citizens' platforms seizing power in cities across Spain, people everywhere are claiming the *right to the city* (Harvey, 2012): the right to live well in the city and to participate fully in the governance of the urban spaces we inhabit. Situating energy democracy as one aspect of this broader desire to take back control over the urban environment is potentially one promising way forward.

### 3. Energy democracy and the state

For Nick Dearden, director of Global Justice Now, the initial attraction of the idea of energy democracy was its resonance with a widespread distrust on the Left of both the market and the state. After the failures of state socialism in the 20th century – and the increasing extent to which the state, since the onset of neoliberalism, has become accountable to the dictates of transnational capital – many on the Left have in recent years given up on the state as an arena of struggle. One result has been an upsurge of interest in non-state, small-scale organisations as holding the promise of an alternative society. In this vein, the concept of energy democracy was, in its earlier usage, perhaps primarily associated with community energy co-operatives operating at the very local level.

It is notable, though, that the non-state orientation of the energy democracy agenda has since shifted. While the proliferation of energy co-operatives across the world has been impressive – and co-operatives have a vital role to play in building energy democracy – their limitations have also been made clear. These schemes have at least in Europe often been somewhat exclusive, accessible only to the middle classes. Moreover, they have, ironically, been

*“Over the last four decades, people have become more distrustful of the state, because people see the way governments have colluded with big business to take power out of our hands and run our societies as commodities for profit. Therefore, we need to approach the issue of the state with some scepticism. But that doesn't mean the state has no role. In fact, we absolutely need to use collective political power through the state to provide in order to enable people to access energy on the scale that we need now. But people can't just say ‘ok we will leave it to the government’. We need to remain in the struggle. Cooperatives have a really important role to play, as a way for people to come together collectively and say ‘no matter what the state does we're going to try and do it by ourselves’. So, it's going to be a complex process of people engaging in politics and with the state, but at the same time retaining a distance from the political process. We've seen how those kinds of strategies have produced in Latin America some incredible results in terms of people gaining access. That was a mixture of movements and progressive governmental action”.*

**Nick Dearden (Global Justice Now)**

found to be dependent upon the whims of the state: in the UK, for instance, a thriving community energy sector was torn to shreds by the government's decision to cut feed-in-tariff subsidies. Meanwhile, thinking beyond the energy sector, the “electoral turn” of the European left – from Greece, to Spain, to the UK – has seen a rejuvenated interest in the possibilities (and contradictions) opened up by struggle at the level of the nation state. Accordingly, ideas and practices of energy democracy have begun to move beyond the micro-scale focus, to confront larger scales and the ever-thorny question of state power. This seems like a healthy development for moving beyond piecemeal reforms, to changing the energy sector as a whole.

What, then, do we know of the state with regard to its place in building energy democracy?

Experiments in state-driven transitions to renewable energy in Latin America are a good place to start thinking this through. In Uruguay, ten years of focused state planning by a left government have seen a transition from a sector dependent upon imported oil to one where renewables occupy 94 per cent of the country's electricity mix and 55 per cent of its energy mix. In ten years, Uruguay went from having zero MW of wind capacity, to the highest proportion of wind penetration in its energy mix in the world. This transition has, moreover, left the population with practically universal energy access. This has all been achieved through long term policy, backed by all of Uruguay's major parties and an adequate legal, regulatory and institutional framework.



The process has been led by UTE, a state-owned enterprise (Casaravilla, 2014). Similarly, in Costa Rica, renewables occupy 79 per cent of the energy mix and 99 per cent of the electricity mix, with almost universal energy access. Here, 85 per cent of energy generation is owned or produced by public institutions, while cooperatives and municipal companies are also active in both generation and distribution.

Such cases demonstrate the potential of state planning and public institutions in pushing ahead with rapid transitions towards clean energy and universal access. However, they ought not to be overly romanticised. While in both Uruguay and Costa Rica the state has played a leading role, much of the infrastructure has been built by foreign companies, offshoring jobs and constraining the possibility of further positive multiplier effects in the national economy. Further, while the democratic credentials of transition through top-down state planning are better than with unelected and unaccountable private companies, there is little in the way of popular participation in either case.

In the case of Uruguay, there are now fears that the impressive work may be under threat: Total, Exxon and Statoil, in partnership with ANCAP, the Uruguayan state-owned oil-refining company, have been conducting exploratory drilling and the discovery of oil reserves now looks likely. Who knows what will happen to the country's green profile of the energy sector (and the economy) if the oil reserves are found to be commercially profitable.

These Latin American examples, then, illustrate both the potential and the challenges of energy democracy through the state. Theorists have long argued that we must understand the state as the product of ongoing struggle. State institutions are deeply embedded within social relations of domination and oppression, from capitalism to colonialism to patriarchy. As such, the state will often frustrate endeavours towards emancipatory change. Yet the state is no mere instrument of the ruling class: while it is structurally biased towards the reproduction of the status quo, struggle from within and outside the state can shift its form and function. Thus, the state is dynamic and contested, with state institutions emerging from a set of processes that are constantly being made and re-made (Jessop, 1982).

The recent experience of Greece illustrates the extent to which the processes that constitute the state have been transformed in recent decades. Syriza's experience was that power no longer operates, primarily, at the nation state level, but instead at the supranational level through the institutions of global capital, in this instance the neoliberal-captured Troika (IMF, European Central Bank and the European Commission). This is not to say that the nation state is rendered as irrelevant, nor is it to accept that the current balance of power is in any way fixed or stable. For energy democracy, though, a number of questions are raised. Most obviously, what kind of political strategies might be capable of pushing the state in the direction of emancipatory energy transitions, when the global balance of power is tipped so strongly in the opposing direction? And in the instances where such emancipatory transitions through the state are won, how might these be defended?

## 4. Energy for whom?

For Venezuelan activist and researcher Edgardo Lander, debates around energy democracy must begin with the question of energy for whom? To unpack this provocation further: who benefits from energy projects and who loses out? Whose interests are served? Whose knowledge is valued? The recent history of energy projects in the Global South has been tied up with the colonial imposition of a capitalist development model and neoliberal structural adjustment policies. It is, of course, large transnational corporations and financial institutions that have benefited, to the detriment of countless lives and livelihoods.

In Latin America, destructive developmentalist projects have sought legitimacy by deploying the discourse of “energy sovereignty”. While this term has also been used by social movements seeking self-governance and resistance to colonialism, governments have co-opted the term to align it more with national sovereignty. The term is now primarily used to impose energy mega-projects such as large-scale hydro-power, the argument being that these huge developments are in the national interest, which overrides the concerns of a comparatively small number of indigenous people who stand to lose out. Despite these new energy projects, energy access remains a huge problem across Latin America. 23.2 million people do not have access to electricity. Haiti remains a regional outlier, with only 29 per cent of its population (mostly concentrated in and around its capital, Port-au-Prince) having access. The cases of Costa Rica and Uruguay are, then, very much exceptions in this instance. This energy inequality could be exacerbated in many regions, for instance in Argentina where the government’s right turn has coincided with energy price increases of up to 750 per cent.

Activist and researcher Benny Kuruvilla explained that India is fast developing as an emerging leader in renewables. It is the fifth largest wind producer in the world and the government aims to install 175GW of new renewable capacity by 2022, with a planned 400 per cent increase in solar capacity by 2017. Yet, alongside this, a round of 400 new coal power plants as well as several new nuclear power stations are planned, including what will be the world’s largest nuclear plant in Jaitapur, where thousands of fisher-folk stand to lose their livelihoods. Moreover, there is the question of who will benefit from these new energy developments, led mainly by the private sector. Currently, 33 per cent of households – around 400 million people – have no access to electricity. The inequalities here are stark: the poorest 20 per cent of the population account for just 5 per cent of national energy usage, while the top 20 per cent account for 80 per cent of energy use.

Regarding Asia, Dorothy Guerrero explained that China is now the biggest renewables investor and the biggest solar manufacturer in the world, aiming for a 20 per cent renewable energy mix by 2030. Renewables currently occupy just 1 per cent of the energy mix, which is dominated by coal (66 per cent) and oil (20 per cent). However, China has been increasing its budget allocation to renewables. It invested \$89.5 billion in 2014 and \$60.8 billion in 2013, more than its investments in fossil fuel and nuclear energy. China plans to invest \$6.6 trillion in total to reconfigure its energy mix and develop new energy sources. China relies on state planning to steer the country towards clean energy development and further reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

David Boys, from the international labour union PSI, explained how China seems to be aware of the social dangers of the massive, extreme pollution caused by their existing energy and manufacturing matrix.

The Philippines is a key site of energy struggle, where there are plans for a new generation of 23 coal power stations to come online by 2030. And, again, we must press whose interests these new energy developments represent? In Thailand, large-scale hydro power is being used to power shopping malls, with Bangkok's emissions now the same as Manhattan. Laos, meanwhile, has aspirations to become the "battery" of the region in order to graduate from its status as a Least Developed Country by selling off vast swathes of forests for usage as biofuels and building huge hydropower dams that will sell energy to neighbouring countries.

South Africa sees a similar pattern of large-scale private investment in both new renewables and fossil fuels. While large TNCs make bumper profits, South Africa's townships are left fighting power cuts, blackouts and increasing bills.

While questions of energy access and energy poverty are now at the heart of the energy democracy project, there has been little attention to the question of what energy should be generated for: what kind of lifestyles, consumption-patterns and relations to nature do we want to promote. This needs to change, with answers being found through learning from those in the Global South on the frontline of resistance to colonial developmental practices.

In the UK, research and campaigns collective Platform have raised the question of how energy democracy might promote practices of energy solidarity. Might, for instance, it be possible for UK activists to pressure local councils to divest their pension funds from fossil fuels

and re-invest this money into supporting emancipatory clean energy projects in the south, defined and controlled by energy users and workers?

*"Energy is a big issue for workers because it's an essential input for production. Energy also shapes the lives of ordinary people in a big way. Without energy, there can be no production, and without energy people can't live dignified and meaningful lives. So, energy is a key input in shaping what people can do and how they live, and the lack of energy is a form of inequality and the absence of democracy. In our country, where we had a system of profound inequality, this extended also to access to energy. Historically, in South Africa, energy was produced to power mines and some big industries, while too many people didn't have access to electricity. So, energy has been a political issue from the beginning".*

**Dinga Sikwebu (NUMSA/United Front)**

## 5. Labour and just transition

Workers in the energy sector occupy a vital strategic position. With energy infrastructure a central cornerstone of the capitalist economy, industrial action targeting this infrastructure has created the leverage necessary for winning many of the most celebrated progressive victories in recent history. Yet the dilemma with energy democracy is that workers are unlikely to want to shut down their own livelihoods by pursuing the end of fossil fuels. The response to this dilemma from within the labour movement and beyond has typically been the call for 'just transition': a shift towards a low-carbon economy which guarantees a fair deal for workers and provides decent secure jobs.

In this regard, the formation of the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) initiative is a sure step forward. TUED was formed in response to the pro-market 'Green Economy' agenda emerging around the Rio+20 Conference in 2012. Unions in Rio decided they needed to push a different vision based

on reclaiming energy to the public sphere. TUED brings together major unions from around the globe, advocating a vision of “Resist, Reclaim, Restructure”: resist the fossil fuel agenda of TNCs, reclaim energy to the public sphere, and restructure the sector to make way for democratically controlled and affordable renewable energy.

The aims of TUED are to promote energy democracy as a core policy priority, while working out what precisely energy democracy might look like in practice, and how it can be built. Although TUED membership is mainly made up of unions from the Global North, unions in South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, India, Nepal and Korea are becoming increasingly involved. Co-ordinator Sean Sweeney explained how unions in TUED have been involved in some impressive projects and victories in recent years, from pushing fracking moratoriums and contributing to the campaign against the Keystone XL pipeline – recently rejected by Obama – to participating in the new Switched On London alliance in the UK.

Some of the most vibrant and successful labour organising around energy issues has taken place in South Africa, with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) playing a pivotal role. NUMSA – and the

*“Activists around the world are trying to define the governance principles of a just, progressive and sustainable energy system.*

*Some organisations refer to it as energy democracy, while others prefer to call it energy justice or energy sovereignty. I think there’s still more discussion required to sort out what we all mean when we propose all these concepts, but I think we’re converging towards a common understanding of the energy transition that people and the planet urgently need to implement”.*

**Victor Menotti (International Forum on Globalization)**

campaign for one million climate jobs – have won key gains around energy access, securing free basic units of electricity and contesting privatisation measures. Yet Dinga Sikwebu, Co-ordinator of NUMSA’s United Front, notes that this work on energy has always been stop-start on account of the rhythms of trade union processes. Unlike struggles around wages, which must always take precedence as a

core component of labour movement activity, energy issues are not central in this way and, thus, extra capacity is required to maintain a consistent focus.

That one of the most successful labour initiatives around just transition and energy democracy can be patchy is telling. In general, the relationship between the labour movement and low-carbon transition tends to be rather ambiguous. While TUED has been welcomed by many, it has met with resistance in some instances. Indeed, unions have often been openly hostile to the low-carbon agenda. In Germany, for example, recent protests against lignite coal mining met with active resistance from major unions.

For David Boys of Public Services International (PSI), the problem is that the conventional energy sector offers jobs that, although often dangerous, are very well paid. The current model of centralised production sees large concentrations of workers together in one workplace, a model that has typically led to high levels of unionisation and, as such, strong bargaining power. The renewables sector, on the other hand, is something of an unknown quantity. Renewables jobs currently tend to be insecure and non-unionised, while the move towards more decentralised models of generation threatens to undermine the benefits afforded by high density concentrations of workers.

With workers’ overriding concern being job security, it is unsurprising that the response to the low-carbon agenda is often lukewarm.

Thus, the question of just transition remains challenging. There is much work to be done from unionising the renewables sector to developing concrete plans for finance and industrial conversion. In formulating these transition plans, TNI's Hilary Wainwright suggests that we might look to the example of workers at the Lucas Aerospace factory in the 1970s. Faced with redundancy, Lucas Aerospace workers – whose jobs were largely connected to producing parts for military equipment – developed an Alternative Plan for how their skills and knowledge could be put to use for socially useful technologies. Proponents of energy democracy must do all they can to mobilise the knowledge of energy sector workers to achieve the democratisation of technology we desire.

## 6. Moving forwards

This report has attempted to take a more in depth look at some of the challenging issues facing movements and scholars pursuing energy democracy, from the relation to state power to solidarity with decolonial struggles and the paradoxes of just transition. The following questions might make something of an interesting research agenda going forward:

- *Democratising technology:* The energy sector is changing fast, from batteries and storage to smart grids and smart meters. These new technologies promise to transform our everyday relationship to energy, with energy consumption becoming increasingly monitored, calculated and responsive to changes in supply. It seems as though these new technologies will play an important role in the transition to a 100 per cent renewable economy. But, at present, these technologies are being trialled and backed by multinational corporations, raising worries about access and affordability, as well as the ownership of data and information generated from new smart technologies. Advocates of energy democracy need to get up to speed on these technological developments in order to outline an alternative agenda for their ownership, control and usage.
- *Democratising large public utilities:* As energy democracy proponents turn their attention to the nation state, there is the question of how large public utilities can retain democratic control and accountability. The corporatisation of utilities is a considerable worry, with Eskom in South Africa and Vattenfall in Sweden demonstrating the risks.
- *Progressive public management:* As Ioannis Margaritis (Vice Chair of Greece's electricity distribution network operator) explained, when Syriza took power of state institutions in Greece the new government inherited a deeply neoliberal architecture and institutional culture. Public institutions are now run by business-schooled corporate managers, in deeply hierarchical and bureaucratic ways. Undoing this is a huge task and rebuilding new institutional culture is another challenge. What would a progressive agenda for public management look like?
- *Energy democracy and trade:* A new round of free trade agreements are currently being drafted, such as TiSA (Trade in Services Agreement) and TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership). These trade deals are about cementing corporate power and neoliberal

governance. They offer corporations the power to sue governments for measures that reduce revenues or challenge private ownership, such as moratoriums on fossil fuels and reversals of privatisation. TiSA's technological neutrality provision would limit government's abilities to distinguish between high and low carbon energy sources. These trade deals, if agreed, will therefore pose huge obstacles to realising energy democracy. More work is needed on the specific implications of these new trade deals for energy democracy, and alliances must be forged with the trade justice movement.

- *Energy democracy case studies:* We need to build up our collection of case studies of energy democracy, particularly from the Global South. As well as building a knowledge-base of where energy democracy initiatives have worked well, we should also consider cases where energy democracy has not taken off in order to draw the relevant lessons.
- *Energy democracy and climate justice:* As the climate justice movement stronger, how can our agenda for energy democracy be connected to climate justice in mutually supportive ways? How can advocacy for energy democracy strengthen movements for climate justice?
- *Financing:* Building on the work of the likes of Platform in the UK, we need to think more carefully about how the capital divested from fossil fuels can be reinvested in ways that build energy democracy. We need new ideas for public financing options as an alternative to Public Private Partnerships. We need concrete and achievable financing plans for just transition initiatives.
- *Mapping the global energy sector(s):* We need a more comprehensive map of interconnected energy sectors across the globe and the ways in which this is shaped by different factors from geopolitics to technological development, regulation to infrastructure.
- *Energy, securitisation and militarisation:* As the links between energy, securitisation and militarisation become an increasingly important geopolitical issue, we need to consider the ways in which this geopolitical backdrop impacts upon questions around energy democracy. How, for instance, might we address the prevalent framing of 'energy security', given the links between this agenda and notions of national security? Might the formation of new alliances between energy democracy and anti-militarist movements provide a productive terrain to move forward?
- *Connecting energy democracy to other struggles:* As this report has shown, energy issues are deeply connected to a range of other questions, from finance to geopolitics. Dinga Sikwebu commented, at the workshop, that struggles around energy transition need to be more explicitly linked, with Dinga highlighting as an example the need to understand South Africa's energy sector in the context of the country's mineral-industrial complex. How, then, might alliances across struggles be made, such that energy democracy issues do not remain constrained within a single-issue silo?

Making a start on expanding our knowledge-base in this direction will be vital for the future of our struggle. But we cannot, of course, hope to win through research and argument alone. As we noted in our opening discussion, getting serious on emancipatory energy transition requires concrete political strategies. We need to think about building power.

Previous successful struggles around water privatisation offer a starting point for reflection. Here, a loose international network of progressive groups, movements and scholars proved an effective organisational base for sharing knowledge and resources. The Water Justice movement has combined local struggles with national and international policy advocacy, building public awareness and opposition to privatisation, and marshalling growing support for public water. Individual high profile flash-points of struggle – perhaps most memorably the Cochabamba water wars in Bolivia – proved crucial in building solidarity and momentum internationally. An interesting question for the energy democracy realm is where such flash-points might emerge today, and how they might be capitalised on.

Yet, as much as comparative cross-issue analyses are useful, energy is not water. Energy occupies a pivotal role in global capitalism in a way that water does not. Yet unlike water, energy is not something that we can see or touch,

*“What the promoters of TTIP and similar agreements are saying is ‘I’m sorry, you cannot decide politically to have renewable energies, to have zero carbon energies. Because the priority is protecting our investments and protecting our profits’. It is as simple as that. It’s about protecting investors’ ability to determine the future of our countries, our planet, our energy systems, our health systems, our education systems”.*

**David Boys (PSI)**

rendering it as a less tangible presence in our everyday lives. Our struggles around energy, must leap upwards – to the stage of global power relations – and also downwards, to the daily rhythms of how energy is used and consumed. We must not reify energy as something to be considered in isolation, but rather think about how patterns of energy production, distribution and usage are shaped by power relations operating at a variety of scales and sectors – and how, equally, these power relations and sectors are shaped by energy. Accordingly, the movement for energy democracy should craft new

endeavours to democratise other aspects of social life, from the workplace to financial institutions, food to healthcare.

This, indeed, was one lesson shared by Ioannis Margaris. Ioannis found that his endeavours to craft out a progressive energy plan for Greece, upon Syriza’s election, were deeply affected by a range of factors beyond energy and, indeed, beyond the scale of the nation state. The contradictions of the Syriza experience notwithstanding, the rise of left electoral projects across Europe doubtless presents proponents of energy democracy with an interesting window of opportunity.

If we want to stand a chance of moving beyond micro-scale successes to transforming the energy sector as a whole, state planning will be essential. The rise of parties of the Left, then, is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss out on. Policy-makers and politicians are on the look-out for progressive energy policies. We need to offer them a bold but concrete vision for building energy democracy in the here and now.

Yet the discussion of the state in this paper highlights the pitfalls that this inevitably brings. While we cannot afford to eschew new left parties, equally we must not invest all of our hope in their direction. Parties of the left will not deliver transformative change without a strong grassroots movement ready to

mobilise in opposition when their emancipatory agendas veer off course, and to rally in their defence against the inevitable onslaught from transnational capital. Thus, again, we come back to the question of building social power, forging new alliances and assessing where the cracks or choke-points in the prevailing order may lie and how these might best be made use of.

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## The contributors

- **Alberto Cortes Ramos**, University of Costa Rica
- **Alfredo Ramos**, Technical Adviser, Podemos Madrid
- **Anna Galkina**, Switched on London
- **Benny Kuruvilla**, Independent Researcher
- **Brian Ashley**, Alternative Information and Development Centre
- **Claus-Dieter König**, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Brussels Office
- **Daniel Chavez**, Transnational Institute
- **David Boys**, Public Services International
- **David McDonald**, Municipal Services project
- **Dinga Sikwebu**, National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa
- **Dorothy Guerrero**, Focus on the Global South
- **Edgardo Lander**, Transnational Institute
- **Fiona Dove**, Transnational Institute
- **Hilary Wainwright**, Transnational Institute
- **Ioannis Margaris**, Hellenic Electricity Distribution Network Operator
- **James Angel**, Switched On London
- **José Deras**, Central American Bank for Economic Integration
- **Joseph Wilde-Ramsing**, Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations
- **Kolya Abramsky**, Independent Researcher
- **Lavinia Steinfort**, Transnational Institute
- **Lyda Fernanda Forero**, Transnational Institute
- **Marlis Gensler**, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Brussels Office
- **Matthijs Peters**, Transnational Institute
- **Mika Minio-Paluello**, Platform London
- **Myriam Vander Stichele**, Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations
- **Nick Buxton**, Transnational Institute
- **Nick Dearden**, Global Justice Now
- **Pablo Cotarelo**, Independent Researcher
- **Satoko Kishimoto**, Transnational Institute
- **Sean Sweeney**, Trade Unions for Energy Democracy
- **Sebastián Torres**, National Direction of Planning, Presidency of the Republic of Uruguay
- **Stefan Taschner**, Berliner Energietisch
- **Susan Spronk**, Municipal Services Project
- **Tomislav Tomasevic**, Institute for Political Ecology
- **Victor Menotti**, International Forum on Globalization

From energy access to climate justice and from anti-privatisation to workers' rights, people across the world are taking back power over the energy sector, kicking-back against the rule of the market and reimagining how energy might be produced, distributed and used. For many movements involved in struggles around energy, the concept of *energy democracy* is proving increasingly useful as a means of bringing together disparate but clearly linked causes under a shared discourse and, possibly, something of a common agenda.

There is no singular understanding of the call for energy democracy. The term clearly evokes a desire for collective control over the energy sector, counterposed with the dominant neoliberal culture of marketisation, individualisation and corporate control. Energy democracy is concerned with shifting power over all aspects of the sector – from production to distribution and supply, from finance to technology and knowledge – to energy users and workers. Movements deploying the concept of energy democracy also demand a socially just energy system, meaning universal access, fair prices and secure, unionised and well-paid jobs. They want an energy system that works in the public interest, with the profit motive giving way to social and environmental goals. And they seek a transition from high to low carbon energy sources, ultimately meaning a world powered entirely by renewable energy.

