

Just Transition for Workers and Communities

A transition to safer technologies, materials and processes will have many potential benefits to workers and the Massachusetts economy as a whole. While the health and environmental benefits are easy to see, there are concerns that this transition would involve job loss and potential tradeoffs in health and safety. Workers and communities must be empowered to help direct the change to safer technologies and must be sufficiently supported in the transition.

The nation has committed to supporting the principle of transition assistance for displaced workers--through programs such as the Trade Adjustment Assistance program and the Workforce Investment Act. These programs, however, do not go far enough in supporting workers. In fact, they accept the destruction of jobs rather than trying to build a vision of a better future. Although some displacement is inevitable in any significant change, the nation should commit to a policy of *Just Transition*, which would ensure a far stronger worker voice in technology decisions and a far higher level of worker and community transition support.

The Need for a Collective Worker Voice in Workplace Technology Decisions

Changes in workplace technologies and processes, even those designed to achieve positive goals of toxics use reduction and sustainability, can have a wide range of negative impacts on the workforce, including job loss, increases in workload and work pace, de-skilling, new skill demands, and health and safety impacts like repetitive strain injuries and stress-related illnesses. Historically, workers have had little or no voice in decisions about workplace technologies and processes; concern over direct, short-term profits has been the primary driver of such decisions. Even where workers have had the apparent opportunity to participate in technology choices, they generally have entered the discussion without the necessary resources (such as paid training and compensated time away from their normal work duties), information and leverage. It is, therefore, critical that decisions about changes in technologies, processes, and materials that are made to achieve health and environmental improvement involve an active, supported and collective worker voice.

Just Transition: Economic Safeguards for Workers and Communities

Preventive environmental, health and safety policies in government should be supported by a policy of *Just Transition*, which is about engaging workers to plan ahead for changes toward cleaner and safer technologies and processes. Policies to protect the environment and health can and should avoid eliminating jobs wherever possible. *Just Transition is first and foremost about improving and maintaining good jobs at sustainable and healthy workplaces.* Where it becomes impossible to protect existing jobs, safeguards for workers and communities must be in place, such as full-income and education support until jobs of equivalent income and skill are found. Such policies reflect a political and social obligation to ensure that society as a whole, rather than dislocated workers and affected communities, takes responsibility for the impacts caused by changes from which everyone benefits.

Just Transition policies should do the following:

1. **Ensure a collective worker voice in workplace technology decisions.** Decision-making about changes in technology, process, and materials made for health and environmental

improvement must involve an active and supported worker voice. For workers to become effective participants in applying safer technologies and materials in the workplace, the following are needed:

- *collective bargaining processes* to ensure worker engagement in technology decisions;
- *full information* on technologies and their impacts to workers;
- *rights to independent analysis* of technologies, processes, and work organization by worker representatives; and
- *resources for workers* such as paid training and compensated time away from their normal work duties and technical support in analyzing the impacts of change.

2. **Establish a Just Transition Fund.** A fund should be created through a small surcharge on dangerous products and processes, supplemented by federal and state tax revenues (eco-taxes). The fund would work in coordination with existing displaced worker programs in Massachusetts, in particular, Workforce Investment Act programs. The Just Transition Fund would do the following:

- a. **Commit resources to researching alternative technologies and processes that would retain jobs.** When preventive actions in Massachusetts, entailing changes in technology and materials, could result in displacement of Massachusetts workers, the state should commit resources (to universities, government agencies, and independent third parties) to researching alternative technologies, processes, and work practices to keep workers employed in positions of equivalent or greater income and skill. When such preventive actions could result in workers' dislocation in other states, the Massachusetts government should work with those states to ensure Just Transition policy and funding. Such commitment of public resources should be accompanied by *public and private investment, and corporate responsibility* to move towards more cleaner and safer technologies, well in advance of crises due to unsustainable production.
- b. **Create worker and community support mechanisms.** The just transition fund would establish a support mechanism to provide workers and communities with full income, benefits and educational support. It should also support workers in taking an active part in workplace technology decision-making. It should:
 - **Create jobs in sustainable sectors.** Support communities to increase employment in new industries based on sustainable production and public/service sector job creation. This may include support for alternative industries.
 - **Support re-employment.** This would include facilitated transition to new employment through career planning and advice, and preferential hiring for displaced workers in new, alternative emerging industries.
 - **Protect income for up to four years.** This would happen through unemployment insurance and other subsidies, where employment income is less than in the lost job or where there is no alternative work.
 - **Protect older workers.** For older workers it would provide full income and benefits until normal retirement.
 - **Provide re-education and training.** It would provide educational tuition reimbursement for up to four years, in addition to income support for workers with one or more years of service.

- **Protect communities.** The Fund would provide redevelopment and health care funds to communities living adjacent to the facilities affected by environmental and health policies. These funds would create job opportunities in affected communities but would not relieve polluters of their responsibility to clean up toxic facilities.
- **Provide support resources for ensuring a collective worker voice.**