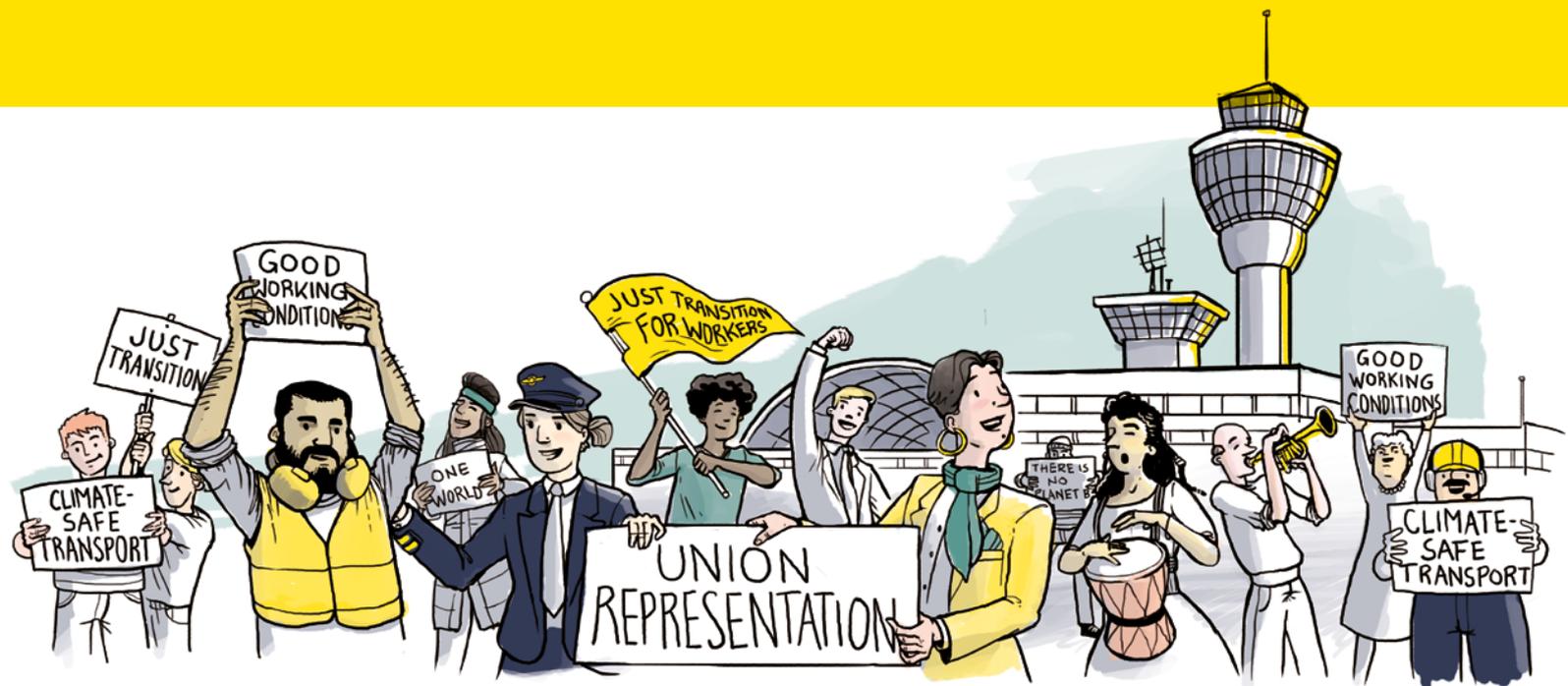




A guide to engaging aviation workers and trade unions



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Climate campaigners are coalescing around an agenda of no expansion of airports and the need for a long-term reduction of aviation. However, not all of these campaigns have incorporated worker perspectives to better understand the impact on jobs and changes to local and national economies.

Jobs are one of the main industry arguments for airport expansion and aviation growth. Having a good answer, making the case for worker's rights, and building solidarity will be key for the success of any campaign.

This short guide explores how your campaigns can connect better with aviation workers and the trade unions that represent them – to build mutual support, win those campaigns and advance a rapid and just transition for workers in the sector.

The document builds on three key reports, which are strongly recommended reading for any aviation campaigner:

- **'A Rapid and Just Transition of Aviation - Shifting towards Climate-Just Mobility'**¹, a result of a collective writing process of members of the Stay Grounded Network and the UK's Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

- **'A Green New Deal for Gatwick' and 'A Green New Deal for Leeds City Region'**², which were collaborations between campaigners, trade union representatives and Green House think tank.

It was further informed by a series of interviews held with trade unionists, including:

- Jeremy Anderson, Head of Research and Sustainable Transport lead, International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)
- Eoin Coates, Head of Aviation, European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF)
- Anna Markova, Industry and Climate Policy Officer, TUC (UK)
- Kamaljeet Gill, Public Services and Transport Policy Officer, TUC (UK)
- Dennis Dacke, National Civil Aviation Section, Verdi (Germany)
- Gabrielle Jeliazkov, Campaigner, Platform (UK)
- Finlay Asher and Todd Smith, Safe Landing

WE RECOMMEND FIVE STEPS

1. **Understand unions and workers:** Building trust will take time and energy. Engagement should be positive and creative, but at the right levels and with realistic objectives.
2. **Lead on jobs:** Unemployment is not an option. Campaigns should promote an alternative economic vision that prioritises job security and quality.
3. **Focus on future threats:** The pandemic revealed the stark vulnerability of the aviation sector and workers.

Highlight the dual climate and ecological crisis as the next threat and the need to plan for a just transition. The longer that takes, the more unjust it will become.

4. **Back workers' demands:** The industry's decade-long race to the bottom has harmed both people and the planet; workers and trade unions have their own battles. Be allies!
5. **Avoid generalisations:** Circumstances vary across workers, unions, airlines, airports and countries. Tailor your engagement appropriately.



Engagement can reveal the real divide: between those invested in the industry and its race to the bottom, and those invested in a liveable planet.

WHY ENGAGE?

Aviation, unlike some other high-carbon sectors, is still expanding. Yet the Covid-19 pandemic saw at least 400,000 jobs lost or in jeopardy at airlines alone.³ This makes the very notion of any further transition, never mind a **'just transition' – the safeguarding of workers' livelihoods as the sector faces up to the climate crisis** – contentious.⁴ However shaky the promise of aviation's continued growth might be, opposition to airport expansion is perceived as an overt attack on the potential for both job creation and job preservation within the sector. With airports presented as anchors of local employment, often amid a sea of fragility, a threat to an airport is considered a threat to an area's future prosperity (particularly where there is municipal ownership and investment in an airport). As a result, workers and activists have found themselves on opposite sides of the argument on aviation and the climate. Neither benefit from this estrangement.

A just transition needs workers and trade unions as its agents for change. It needs their expertise, their skills and their democratic engagement. Climate and environmental campaigns suffer from a lack of dialogue with workers and trade unions. Without it, demands risk ignoring the interests of those currently dependent on the sector. This group includes not just those directly employed by it, but their

families and wider communities. There is an argument – deployed to great effect by airport owners – that campaigners don't care about the livelihoods of working people. **Collaboration can highlight the real divide: between corporate leaders chasing short-term returns, and workers and activists who need a secure future and a liveable planet.** Alliances between climate activists and trade unions can also help develop the case for redirected investment, and a real alternative: not just the same area with a smaller airport, but a stronger local economy, and a better future.

Building trust and close relationships with unions and workers will take time and energy. It will be your decision as an activist group, NGO or citizen initiative if this is the strategy you can pursue, and if you are the right group to do so. Another option is to identify other stakeholders – politicians, universities, local activists or other organisations – and ask them to lead this work to elaborate just transition plans with unions and workers. This guide aims to serve as a basis for your strategic decision. Even if your campaign focus might not be organising processes with unions and workers, the relationship is critical to bear in mind, and the guide can give you recommendations for your tactics and messaging.

1. UNDERSTAND UNIONS AND WORKERS

The concept of a just transition for the sector has not yet been popularised – no airline, airport, government or trade union has published a plan for one, and even in sectors much further down that road, like oil and gas, there is evidence that few workers have even heard of the term.⁶ The first challenge, therefore, is to **commit to building trust**. Without engagement and foresight underpinned by this principle, the transition will be anything but “just”.

“We recognise that there will be a monumental shift in the number of jobs [in terms of a reduction]. This is a real issue for trade unions in terms of self-preservation.”⁵

TRADE UNION STRUCTURES

Trade unions **vary hugely** across countries and the different professions they represent. How to best navigate their internal structures will depend on these distinct circumstances. Nonetheless, there are some common characteristics that campaigners can bear in mind.

Stay Grounded has a growing bank of trade union and workers’ initiatives contact details. Please get in touch if you’re interested or can add to it: info@stay-grounded.org

The most common basis of union organisation in the workplace is the ‘shop steward’. These are representatives elected by trade union members to protect the interest of their fellow employees. They are employees of the company, but may have agreed work time which they can use for union activity. **Shop stewards or ‘reps’** at the branch level (e.g. the airport) or lay regional representative level (e.g. elected to a regional committee) **are likely to be the best first contact for local campaigns**. They are closest to the work itself and have a direct material interest in it. While contact details may not be publicly available, the head office or regional office of the trade union may provide them upon request – if not then the regional organiser may be willing to. Bear in mind that shop stewards have their own employment to look after as well as day-to-day industrial relations with the employer; engagement should be sensitive to their capacity to engage on wider issues, especially at times of crisis and when colleagues’ jobs or conditions are under immediate threat.

Outside of the workplace are **regional, sectional and national organisers** and **industrial officers**, appointed and employed by the union but offering direct support to union members and representatives. Organisers are charged with recruiting and maintaining members in a certain sector or region – in line with the ‘organising model’ of trade unionism⁷ – while industrial officers support members in nego-

tiations or disputes with employers. Again their priorities will be most directly determined by immediate workplace concerns, and they will also be the public facing voice for workers when industrial issues arise. **Policy and research officers** are a step further inside union bureaucracy – they will be more attuned to broader union positioning on issues like climate breakdown. They may be the best first port of call for engagement at a national level, and to explore the union’s formal policy positions. Trade union leaders, often called the **General Secretary**, can be targeted with national, public campaigning communications, such as open letters.

Umbrella organisations for all trade unions in a country are called **Congresses** or **Confederations**, and play an important role in convening unions across the economy and representing a united voice. The aviation sector, inherently global in scope, is represented internationally through federations, for example the **European Transport Workers Federation (ETF)** and the **International Transport Workers Federation (ITF)**. These umbrella bodies can all play an important role in building momentum around issues, determining long-term trajectories for the sector and leveraging policy influence. ETF for example during 2021 held a series of internal discussions on sustainability, including a session with Stay Grounded on a just transition. However, federations often operate on consensus, and will struggle to go faster than their largest members.

UK Trades Councils

In the UK, Trades Councils were set up to bring together trade unionists from across different sectors to promote solidarity among local communities. Although sidelined and severely weakened during the decline of unions over recent decades, the Trades Councils that still exist have economy-wide memberships and a progressive focus on community welfare across the board (as opposed to sector-specific growth) - leading some to be close allies on the climate crisis. See for example Leeds Trades Council’s formal support for the anti-expansion campaign at Leeds Bradford Airport.⁸

Internal policymaking is supposed to reflect the democratic core of trade unionism. National conferences of delegates are normally empowered to determine policies, and leadership roles are mostly directly elected by the membership. Changing national policy remains a complex and drawn-out process however. Conferences to determine policy are generally annual and there is little scope for direct influence from external campaigners. Democratic structures can also be deeply flawed, and there can be consistent failures to act in the long-term interests of workers and their communities.

NON-UNION ORGANISATIONS

A number of groups have emerged directly from the aviation workforce to openly challenge the industry's role in the climate crisis, particularly the greenwash it deploys to obscure the technological realities of decarbonisation.

- Internationally, but with a UK focus, **Safe Landing** represents "climate concerned aviation professionals" including pilots, engineers, and cabin crew, and calls for early adoption of regulations to reduce emissions and a plan to support workers during any transition.⁹
- In France, a group of aerospace engineers called **Supaero Decarbo** recently proposed an 'Industrial Alliance for the Climate' to take charge of a transition that could otherwise result in short-term jobs losses.¹⁰ There is also the Collectif ICARE¹¹ and the Etudiants pour l'Aéronautique Soutenable (Students for Aeronautic Sustainability).¹²

These groups offer fruitful opportunities for collaboration between activists and workers, including union non-members - but **care should therefore be taken to avoid bypassing entirely the unions who have a formal representative role and carry significantly greater weight.**

IDEAS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The objectives of any engagement should be realistic, and expectations carefully set, especially at the outset. Campaigns should:

- Establish points of contact on at least a neutral basis. This could involve identifying common interests: like democratising the economy, decent work locally and around the world, the importance of combating the climate emergency for long-term security of livelihoods and jobs etc. It can also be good for a basic information exchange, for example advance notice of upcoming campaign activities, or offers of support.
- Build worker-minded messages into both public campaigning and union communication, taking opportunities to highlight shared interests across the climate and labour agendas. (See later in this guide.)
- Determine who is best placed to lead or convene engagement with workers and unions. Is it campaigners themselves, who may have a negative reputation among unions? Or is it rather a supportive local politician, activist group or scientist who can command respect in the labour movement?
- Once trust is established with representatives or organisers, ask that membership be convened so that direct, two-way engagement can take place. Only if this cannot be secured, consider reaching out to the workforce directly, for example by canvassing views at the airport or holding an open meeting.
- Offer capacity where it is available, for example by supporting a union's messages on social media, joining a worker's strike or action, offering yourself or colleague as a speaker for a meeting, undertaking a worker survey to find out their views on pollution or just transition obstacles, or helping them to increase their membership among the existing workforce.

2. LEAD ON JOBS

Jobs should be a distinct priority strand in any advocacy campaign. Unemployment is simply not an option for most workers, no matter how compelling the emotions or the evidence of the climate emergency. Campaigners can first **undermine the claims of airport owners**, picking apart the dodgy economic case for expansion¹³ and pointing to past exaggerations of employment potential.¹⁴

A wider economic vision for the region around the airport should be called for or developed, with alternative economic strategies that reduce reliance on the airport. This could provide the employment and economic resilience needed locally to avert the devastation caused when a single dominant employer faces a crisis.¹⁵ Green job creation is an alternative to continued reliance on (new) airport jobs, with enormous potential for investment in public transport among many other areas. Practical recent examples include the redeployment of Swiss pilots and German flight attendants to their respective rail services.¹⁶

Emphasise the importance of job quality, social protection and retraining opportunities as part of this vision, safeguarding and improving pay, contract security and workplace representation (most of which are still strong in aviation relative to many other sectors).¹⁷

3. FOCUS ON FUTURE THREATS

Despite the industry trebling in size in the last 30 years, job numbers in European aviation remained flat.¹⁹ With each demand shock – from 9/11 to the global financial crisis – intense international competition drove job numbers down rapidly, which took many years to recover. With perpetual **short-termism** caused by the liberalisation of the sector during this period, economic decisions have been governed by short-term business cycles (while relying on subsidies to continue long-term growth).

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed **workers' true vulnerability**: 43% of aviation jobs were at risk of being lost internationally²⁰ and 191,000 only across Europe²¹ despite an unprecedented €38 billion in public bailouts across Europe as well as widespread job retention schemes.²² Unions that had not spoken of a just transition in aviation, like the TUC in the UK, did so for the first time. However, in a sign of the shakiness of this progress, just a few months later the TUC and six UK trade unions joined with Heathrow Airport to call for a “full aviation recovery”, with no mention of transition.²³

The climate emergency is the next threat. Already policy and behavioural shifts offer a foretaste of the future, with

“The key role of a union is to keep people in decent work. If this can be done in a sustainable transport sector, then all the better.”

This, in turn, necessitates **engagement with airport workers and trade unions** to understand their current situation and concerns for the future. Understanding and incorporating their circumstances, expertise and aspirations is vital for any vision's legitimacy. As is recognition of the strong attachment many feel towards the aviation sector despite the threats it faces. In any case, transition pathways developed within the sector will be more compelling than those developed outside it.¹⁸ It should not be overlooked that many airport jobs are only associated with the airport to service passengers but are looked upon as an equally vital part of the local economy. Engagement with these workers, often in retail and hospitality, is also important.

“Covid was a big wake-up call. Airlines now accept the need for long-term strategic thinking and planning for worst case crises in the future.”

new taxes on kerosene²⁴, local government opposition to airport expansion²⁵ and a modal shift towards long-distance rail.²⁶ As technology development fails to keep pace with the imperative to decarbonise, scepticism regarding the industry's promises of providing a jobs-rich future will intensify.

One key argument from the aviation sector, often backed by unions, is that decarbonising aviation will allow for further growth. A key element of campaigning will therefore be to make clear why decarbonising aviation is not realistic in the next decades, which is why demand reduction is necessary, especially in the Global North.²⁷

4. BACK WORKER DEMANDS

Despite their frequent alignment on airport expansion, aviation workers and trade unions have their own significant struggles with their industry. There is no reason why climate campaigners should not **take their lead and back them on their own terms**. They can promote labour priority issues in their communications and include trade union demands in their advocacy. Connections can be made, from a sector that undercuts and underpays its workforce to one that is simultaneously failing to adapt to the climate emergency. The race to the bottom has benefited neither workers nor the environment. Campaigners should seek to build a relationship of solidarity and even if communication is one-sided, maintain it and ask what the campaign can do to help.

“We don’t just want to get the industry back to where it was in 2018, but decarbonised. Because that wasn’t a good industry for workers. Transport had become too cheap, it was market driven. There is a need to embark on a huge transformation of the industry.”

LABOUR STRUGGLES VARY FROM PLACE TO PLACE AND INCLUDE:

- **‘Fire and rehire’**: The practice of eroding pay and conditions by sacking workers and immediately re-hiring them on worse conditions surged during the Covid-19 pandemic and has been described by UK trade union Unite as “a disease that is ripping through our workplaces”.²⁸ Airlines like British Airways were top offenders and unions are calling for it to be banned.²⁹
- **Race to the bottom**: “Aviation’s growth in Europe was to a large extent enabled by social dumping of low-cost airlines,” states the European Transport Federation. “These practices must be ended.” The practice of labour arbitrage is one inevitable result of liberalisation and international competition: airlines shopping around for the lowest labour standards to reduce costs. The result is that for example, 50% of low-cost carrier pilots are now flying without direct employment.³⁰
- **Minimum pricing**: Ver.di, the main aviation trade union in Germany, recently called for a minimum €40 flight price across Europe with a view to improving the minimum employment standards for aviation workers across the EU, UK and Switzerland.³¹ This followed the introduction of such a minimum price in Austria as a condition for its Covid-19 bailout package and similar calls from the Norwegian Pilots’ Association and Dutch parliamentarians.³² The policy helps both climate and labour agendas, constraining demand (especially for short-haul flights that can be made by rail) while improving wages and raising the cost of flying.
- **Public ownership**: Many unions have long called for public stakes in struggling airlines during crises. Some would say the Covid-19 pandemic strengthened the case for strategic investment to accelerate technology development and protect jobs.³³ There are also concerns that, in its absence, airlines with high debts will turn to overseas owners with lower labour standards. See for example Qatar Airways’ investment in IAG, which owns British Airways, Iberia and Aer Lingus.³⁴ While it is by no means a given that public ownership guarantees a just transition, the principle of economic democracy can be the basis for faster and broader rethink of the sector’s trajectory.³⁵

5. ANALYZE THE CONTEXT – AVOID GENERALISATIONS

Engagement with unions and workers should be tailored to different circumstances depending on the union representation, airline, airport and context of the country.

Different unions, and different types of unions, have different positions on the concept of a just transition. These vary across countries – from strong corporate-worker relationships in Scandinavia to federated unions across different sectors in the Mediterranean. Smaller unions representing one type of worker (e.g. BALPA in the UK and SEPLA in Spain, both representing pilots) will be less open to shifting jobs than unions who also represent other transport sector workers or a wider section of the economy (such as Ver.di in Germany). SEPLA, for example, is entirely dependent on Iberia (part of IAG). Generally speaking, the broader the coverage of the union, the greater the scope for making the case for a just transition and collaboration across sectors – for example from planes to trains. Initiating internal discussions to overcome traditional divisions between sectors (for example, the tax treatment of one form of transport relative to another) could support this.

Workers' receptiveness to a just transition is likely to vary substantially between **different airlines**. Low-cost carriers employ their cabin attendants and flight crew at much lower wages, often with lower age profiles. For example, Luft-

hansa's basic full-time flight attendant wages are currently more than double those at Ryanair as at 2021, and their pilots can earn more than three times more. This is reflected in differences in their age profile: Lufthansa cabin crew average is 42, compared to an average of 25 for Ryanair. These characteristics affect the appetite for a just transition: the transition to work as a train attendant at Deutsche Bahn would result in a pay increase for a flight attendant with Ryanair but a wage cut for one currently employed by Lufthansa.

The size of the airport and the change in employment levels over time can also have an effect. Workers at fast growing airports with job growth to match (Amsterdam Schiphol, for example) are likely to be less attuned to the threat of job insecurity than those at stagnant or shrinking sites. Governments with a stated commitment to the delivery of a just transition in other sectors, such as that of Spain and Scotland, are better placed to engender the trust of trade unions than those which have eroded major industries and workforces over time.

Other parts of the aviation sector (for instance, **aerospace engineering and manufacturing**) will react differently to change and some may be more prepared and able to transition and modernise without job losses than others.



This report is mostly based on knowledge gathered in Europe. This is why we cannot guarantee that these recommendations serve on a worldwide scale – but we are keen to receive feedback and learn from other experiences. Send it to info@stay-grounded.org

FURTHER READING/ MATERIAL:

Apart from the mentioned publications on the first page, there is a broad range of literature on unions and organizing tactics. Here are just a few examples:

- Workshop (EN, DE): Simulation game about just transition at your local airport, the material can be requested by writing to info@stay-grounded.org
- Book: Sinott, S., & Gibbs, P. (2014): Organizing: People, Power, Change
- Book: Russell, J. K., & Moore, H. (2011): Organizing Colors the Planet: Tools and Reflections on Navigating the Climate Crisis

Authors: Robert Magowan, Jonathan Essex, Magdalena Heuwieser - and the Just Transition working group of Stay Grounded

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Stay Grounded is a people-powered, science-based, and action-oriented network for about 180 member initiatives around the world. The network fosters mutual support and exchange of experiences, and campaigns for a reduction of aviation and its negative impacts, as well as against problematic climate strategies like offsetting emissions and biofuels.

Stay Grounded
c/o Kollektiv Periskop
Neustiftgasse 36
1070 Wien, Austria
www.stay-grounded.org
info@stay-grounded.org



The Green European Foundation (GEF) is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate and to foster greater involvement by citizens in European politics. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas, offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level.

Green European Foundation
Rue du Fossé – 1536 Luxembourg
Brussels Office: Mundo Madou –
Avenue des Arts 7-8, 1210 Brussels
Tel: +32 2 329 00 50
E-mail: info@gef.eu
Website: www.gef.eu

END NOTES & LITERATURE

- ¹ Stay Grounded (2021): <https://stay-grounded.org/just-transition>
- ² Green House think tank (2020): <https://bit.ly/GatwickGND> & GALBA (2021): <https://bit.ly/GalbaGND>
- ³ Kotoky, A. et al. (2020): <http://bit.ly/AirCov>
- ⁴ Stay Grounded (2021): <https://stay-grounded.org/just-transition>
- ⁵ While quotes are unattributed, all come from the trade unionists and aviation workers who agreed to be interviewed for this guide.
- ⁶ Platform (2020): <https://bit.ly/OffshoreOilGasviews>
- ⁷ TSSA (no date): <https://bit.ly/TUOrganising>
- ⁸ GALBA (2021): <https://bit.ly/GalbaGND>
- ⁹ Safe Landing website: <https://safe-landing.org>
- ¹⁰ The Shift Project (2021): <https://bit.ly/Flying2050>
- ¹¹ MediaPart (2021): <https://bit.ly/CollectifCARE>
- ¹² SEtudiants (2021): <https://bit.ly/Etudiants-aero>
- ¹³ New Economics Foundation (2020): <https://bit.ly/DodgyEcon>
- ¹⁴ As pointed out in 'A Green New Deal for Leeds Bradford', major past airport expansions - including Birmingham and Bristol - have consistently failed to create the jobs forecasts promoted by their developers. See GALBA (2021): https://bit.ly/GALBA_Leeds
- ¹⁵ reen House think tank (2020): <https://bit.ly/GatwickGND>, GALBA (2021): <https://bit.ly/GalbaGND>
- ¹⁶ Euronews (2021): <https://bit.ly/PlaneToTrain>
- ¹⁷ New Economics Foundation (2020): <https://bit.ly/RightToRetrain>
- ¹⁸ The Stay Grounded (2021) paper on Just Transition considers the opportunities and challenges here (pp. 4-5): <https://bit.ly/RapidJustTransition>. An example of good practice is PCS Aviation Group's member workshops on Jobs of the Future, which informed its support for a just transition.
- ¹⁹ European Parliament (2016): <https://bit.ly/EPEmploymentAviation>
- ²⁰ Airports Council International (2020): <https://bit.ly/46millionJobs>
- ²¹ International Airport Review (2021): <https://bit.ly/truecrisiscost>
- ²² Transport & Environment (2020): <https://bit.ly/BailoutTracker>
- ²³ New Economics Foundation (2020): <https://bit.ly/RightToRetrain>; TUC (2021): <https://bit.ly/TUCsurvival>
- ²⁴ Centre for Aviation (2021): <https://bit.ly/AirlinesTaxes>
- ²⁵ El Pais (2021): <https://bit.ly/BarcelonaExpansion>
- ²⁶ GermanWatch (2021): <https://bit.ly/RailRenaissance>
- ²⁷ Stay Grounded (2021): <https://bit.ly/GreenwashingFacts>
- ²⁸ BBC (2020): <https://bit.ly/FireRehire>
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ European Cockpit Association (2016): <https://bit.ly/SocialDumping>
- ³¹ Spiegel (2021): <https://bit.ly/Minimum40>
- ³² Interview with Dennis Dacke, National Civil Aviation Section, Verdi.
- ³³ Common Wealth (2020): <https://bit.ly/PublicAviation>
- ³⁴ Financial Times (2020): <https://bit.ly/QatarIAG>
- ³⁵ This reflects the Stay Grounded position on public ownership, as articulated in our Just Transition of Aviation Discussion Paper (2021): <https://bit.ly/RapidJustTransition>