

JUST TRANSITION FROM BELOW: HOW MINeworkERS IN ZIMBABWE LINK LABOUR RIGHTS TO CLIMATE JUSTICE

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Abstract: This article examines how mineworkers in Zimbabwe engage with and reshape climate justice debates amid the expansion of extractive industries and the global green transition. Drawing on qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with mineworkers, trade union officials, and civil society actors, the study explores how experiences of labour exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and environmental degradation shape workers' understandings of climate justice. The findings indicate that while civil society organisations and policy actors have largely shaped climate justice discourse, mineworkers are articulating claims grounded in everyday struggles and seeking to participate in shaping just transition processes. These claims centre on demands for stronger regulation of labour and environmental standards, more equitable redistribution of mineral wealth, and forms of reparative justice for communities affected by extractivism. Engagement with transnational labour networks further contributes to the emergence of a worker-centred climate justice consciousness linking workplace struggles to broader socio-ecological concerns. By foregrounding worker agency, the article advances a labour-centred perspective on climate justice in the Global South and argues that a just transition must be democratically negotiated, socially redistributive, and historically attentive.

Keywords: *climate justice; mineworkers; just transition; extractivism; labour rights; regulation; redistribution; reparations; Zimbabwe.*

Introduction

Climate justice debates in Zimbabwe have gained momentum alongside the expansion of critical mineral extraction linked to the global green transition. As global demand for minerals such as lithium increases, Zimbabwe has emerged as an important site of extraction and investment within renewable energy supply chains (Mkodzongi, 2024). The country possesses some of the world's largest lithium reserves, and recent investments in lithium beneficiation further underscore its growing strategic importance in global decarbonisation. Huayou Zimbabwe, through Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe at the Arcadia Mine, reportedly invested approximately US\$400 million to construct a lithium processing plant for electric-vehicle battery production (Ndlovu, 2025). According to *The Sunday Mail* (19 April 2026), the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe



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identified lithium, alongside gold and platinum group metals, as central to the country's mineral-led development strategy.

While these developments are frequently presented as opportunities for economic growth and participation in low-carbon transitions, they also expose important social and ecological contradictions. The expansion of critical mineral extraction has generated employment opportunities, but it has simultaneously exacerbated labour precarity, unsafe working conditions, displacement, and environmental degradation within mining communities (Sovacool, 2021). These tensions reflect broader inequalities within global capitalism, where decarbonisation in the Global North increasingly depends on intensified extraction in resource-rich economies of the Global South. From a labour sociology perspective, the green transition therefore raises important questions concerning labour exploitation, uneven development, and worker experiences within emerging green economies.

Despite growing scholarship on extractivism and climate justice in Africa, especially in Zimbabwe, relatively limited attention has been paid to how mineworkers themselves understand and engage with these processes. Existing debates have largely focused on states, corporations, policy actors, and civil society organisations, with comparatively less emphasis on workers' experiences and perspectives. Yet mineworkers occupy a strategic position within the green transition because they directly confront its social and ecological consequences through everyday experiences of production, labour exploitation, and environmental harm.

This article examines how mineworkers in Zimbabwe link labour struggles to broader questions of climate justice and just transition. Drawing on qualitative interviews with mineworkers, trade union officials from the National Mine Workers Union of Zimbabwe (NMWUZ) and the Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Minerals Workers Union (ZDAMWU), as well as civil society actors from the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), the article argues that sections of workers are developing forms of climate justice consciousness grounded in demands for stronger labour and environmental protections, equitable distribution of mineral wealth, and greater participation in decision-making processes.

The article draws on a framework centred on regulation, redistribution, and reparations to analyse how climate justice claims emerge from below within Zimbabwe's extractive sector (Lenferna, 2025; Gaughran, 2025; Manduna, 2024; Táíwò, 2022). Regulation refers to the enforcement of labour, environmental, and occupational safety standards; redistribution concerns the equitable allocation of benefits derived from mineral extraction; and reparations address the historical and ongoing harms associated with extractive capitalism. This framework provides a lens for understanding how labour rights and environmental justice become interconnected within resource-dependent economies shaped by unequal development.

The article contributes to labour sociology by examining how climate justice consciousness is emerging through workplace struggles and worker-community relations within extractive capitalism. More broadly, it contributes to scholarship on climate justice and transition in three ways. First, it centres mineworkers within climate justice debates. Second, it advances a labour-centred analysis of climate justice by demonstrating how workers connect workplace exploitation to broader socio-ecological inequalities. Third, it contributes to debates on green extractivism in the Global South

by showing how the expansion of critical mineral extraction simultaneously generates economic opportunities while reproducing labour precarity, environmental degradation, and new forms of socio-economic inequality.

The article proceeds by reviewing literature on mining labour, extractivism, and just transition debates, before outlining the theoretical framework and research methodology. It then presents the empirical findings and concludes by reflecting on the implications of worker-led climate justice struggles for just transition politics in resource-dependent economies.

Literature Review

Labour and Exploitation in Zimbabwe's Mining Sector

Mineworkers in Zimbabwe, as in much of Southern Africa, have historically experienced exploitative working and living conditions characterised by low wages, unsafe workplaces, and inadequate social protection (Sachikonye, 2011; Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019). These inequalities are rooted in colonial systems of extraction that relied on coercive labour regimes and generated enduring patterns of racialised and unequal development (van Onselen, 1976). Mining labour has also historically been associated with traditions of worker resistance and militancy, which continued into the postcolonial period (Raftopoulos and Phimister, 2004). Although the organisational strength of labour has weakened under neoliberal restructuring and political repression, workplace struggles remain an important feature of Zimbabwe's mining sector.

Despite political independence, many structural dynamics of extraction have remained intact. Mineral wealth continues to disproportionately benefit foreign capital and domestic elites, while workers and mining communities experience labour precarity, underdevelopment, and environmental degradation (Sachikonye, 2011; Gukurume and Nhodo, 2020). Contemporary mining operations are frequently characterised by unsafe working conditions, insecure employment arrangements, and weak enforcement of labour and environmental regulations (Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019). Resource governance has therefore reproduced uneven development in mining regions while intensifying socio-ecological vulnerabilities (Lafitte, 2022).

Recent transformations in the sector have deepened these contradictions. Following the "Look East" policy, Zimbabwe has attracted significant Chinese investment (Saunders, 2008; Jenkins, 2014), while its lithium reserves have positioned it at the centre of the global green transition (Mkodzongi, 2024). These contradictions have deepened with the expansion of lithium extraction and growing foreign investment linked to the global green transition. Zimbabwe's lithium reserves have positioned the country within global renewable energy supply chains, particularly in relation to electric vehicle battery production (Mkodzongi, 2024). However, scholars argue that the transition to low-carbon economies often reproduces new forms of inequality and environmental harm in resource-dependent economies of the Global South, a process commonly referred to as "green extractivism" (Sovacool, 2021; Gudynas, 2021; Dunlap and Böhm, 2019). In Zimbabwe, lithium extraction simultaneously contributes to global decarbonisation while reproducing labour exploitation, displacement, and socio-ecological inequality within mining communities (Lafitte, 2022; Nyamwanza and Bhatasara, 2025).

Within climate justice scholarship, extractive industries are understood as sites of socio-ecological conflict where struggles over labour, livelihoods, land, and environmental governance intersect (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Schlosberg, 2013). Political ecology and environmental justice research further demonstrate that workers and affected communities are not merely passive victims of extractivism, but active agents who contest environmental degradation and articulate alternative visions of development (Martinez-Alier, 2001; Bebbington et al., 2008). However, much of the literature on extraction and climate justice in Africa has focused primarily on states, corporations, and resource governance, with comparatively limited attention paid to how mineworkers themselves understand and contest these processes in their everyday struggles.

Trade Unions, Climate Injustice, and the Struggle for a Just Transition

The concept of a just transition emerged within labour movements as a response to the social consequences of environmental restructuring and has since evolved into a wider political framework linking climate action to social justice, democratic participation, and equitable development (Räthzel et al., 2018; McCauley and Heffron, 2018). Labour environmentalism scholarship further demonstrates how workplace struggles intersect with questions of ecological sustainability and social justice, particularly in industries associated with environmental degradation and extractivism (Barca, 2019; Moody, 2017).

Within climate justice scholarship, extractive industries are understood as sites of socio-ecological conflict where struggles over labour, livelihoods, land, and environmental governance converge (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013; Schlosberg, 2013). Environmental justice scholars argue that these conflicts extend beyond environmental harm to encompass questions of participation, recognition, and unequal power relations within extractive governance (Özkaynak and Rodríguez-Labajos, 2017; Perreault, 2013). Political ecology and environmental justice research further demonstrate that workers and affected communities are not merely passive victims of extractivism, but active agents who contest environmental degradation and articulate alternative visions of development (Martinez-Alier, 2001; Bebbington et al., 2008; Bond, 2012; Barca, 2019).

Across Africa, trade unions have expanded their engagement with climate justice and just transition debates by linking workers' concerns over wages, occupational safety, and job security to broader socio-ecological questions (Satgar, 2015; ITUC-Africa, 2022). In South Africa, labour movements such as COSATU and NUMSA played an important role in bringing labour perspectives into climate justice debates, particularly around COP17 in Durban in 2011, linking environmental concerns to inequality, energy democracy, and worker participation (Satgar, 2015; Räthzel et al., 2018). Research on labour-environmental alliances further highlight the growing role of organised labour in contesting exclusionary forms of green development and shaping alternative development pathways (Moody, 2017; Barca, 2019). Research further demonstrates that trade unions have advanced climate justice through workplace initiatives, climate education, and policy advocacy, while evidence from Europe and elsewhere shows that organised labour can influence climate governance and challenge socio-economic inequalities associated with environmental transitions

(ITUC, 2015; Labour Research Service, 2018; TUC, 2014; UNISON and University of Leeds CERIC, 2022; Whyte and Crawford, 2023).

At the same time, growing global demand for critical minerals has intensified debates around the contradictions of the green transition. Resource-rich countries in the Global South, including Zimbabwe, have become increasingly important within renewable energy supply chains due to rising demand for minerals such as lithium and platinum group metals (Hund et al., 2020; International Energy Agency, 2021; Mkodzongi, 2024). However, scholars argue that the transition to low-carbon economies often reproduces labour precarity, displacement, and environmental degradation, a process increasingly described as “green extractivism” (Sovacool, 2021; Gudynas, 2021). These dynamics reveal how global decarbonisation efforts may simultaneously generate new forms of socio-ecological inequality within extractive economies of the Global South.

Recent scholarship on labour, climate justice, and extractivism foregrounds the role of grassroots struggles in contesting corporate power and neoliberal forms of “green” development (Bond, 2012; Klein, 2014; Satgar, 2018). However, much of this literature has focused largely on states, civil society organisations, and transnational advocacy networks, with comparatively less attention paid to workers’ own experiences and understandings of climate justice. Limited research examines how mineworkers themselves interpret climate justice, connect workplace struggles to environmental concerns, and seek to shape transition politics from below.

By foregrounding workers’ experiences and agency, this article contributes to emerging scholarship on labour-centred climate justice and worker-led understandings of just transition within extractive economies. The study further provides insight into the contradictions of extractive-led transitions, particularly where the economic opportunities associated with critical minerals coexist with persistent labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and uneven development.

Theoretical Framework – Regulation, Redistribution, Reparations, and Climate Justice

To analyse how mineworkers in Zimbabwe link labour rights with climate justice, this study draws on emerging debates within climate justice scholarship that conceptualise justice through three interrelated dimensions: regulation, redistribution, and reparations (Lenferna, 2025; Gaughran, 2025; Manduna, 2024; Táíwò, 2022). Scholars in environmental sociology and political ecology argue that climate injustice is rooted in structural inequalities embedded within extractivist political economies, particularly in postcolonial contexts where labour exploitation and environmental degradation remain closely interconnected. The framework is acutely relevant in Zimbabwe, where weak regulatory systems, unequal resource distribution, and unresolved historical injustices continue to shape extractive development.

While this study adopts the “three Rs” framework, it is also informed by broader climate justice approaches, particularly distributive, procedural, and recognition justice (Schlosberg, 2013). These perspectives are complementary. Regulation aligns with procedural justice through democratic participation and accountability; redistribution reflects distributive justice through the equitable allocation of resources and benefits; while reparations extend recognition justice by addressing historical and structural

inequalities. Together, these approaches provide an integrated analytical lens for examining how mineworkers understand and articulate climate justice through everyday struggles over labour conditions, environmental protection, and community wellbeing.

Regulation refers to the institutional and political mechanisms governing labour, environmental, and occupational practices within extractive industries. Regulatory systems are inherently political because they shape whose interests are protected and whose risks are externalised (Jasanoff, 2004). Ostrom's (2010) concept of polycentric governance further highlights the importance of participatory and multi-level approaches in addressing complex environmental challenges. In extractive economies such as Zimbabwe, weak enforcement of labour and environmental standards frequently enables corporations to externalise social and ecological costs onto workers and mining communities. From a climate justice perspective, regulation therefore requires not only stronger legal protections, but also meaningful participation of workers and affected communities in governance and decision-making processes (Schlosberg, 2013; Lenferna, 2025). Analytically, this dimension is used to examine how mineworkers understand unsafe working conditions, labour precarity, environmental degradation, and failures of institutional accountability within Zimbabwe's mining sector.

Redistribution concerns the equitable allocation of benefits derived from natural resource extraction and low-carbon transitions. Climate justice scholars argue that green transitions risk reproducing existing inequalities unless the social and economic benefits of extraction are redistributed more equitably (Manduna, 2024; Lenferna, 2025). In resource-dependent economies such as Zimbabwe, redistribution extends beyond wages to include questions of community development, infrastructure provision, access to services, and democratic control over mineral wealth. Redistribution, therefore, links climate justice to broader struggles over economic democracy, social protection, and equitable development within extractive regions. Within this article, redistribution provides an analytical lens for examining workers' demands for fair wages, compensation, livelihood security, and broader socio-economic benefits for mining communities affected by extraction.

Reparations address the historical and ongoing harms associated with extractive capitalism and unequal global development. Environmental justice scholarship demonstrates that ecological destruction and labour exploitation are rooted in racialised and colonial systems of accumulation that continue to shape contemporary extractive economies (Bullard, 1993; Táíwò, 2022). Extending this analysis, Sullivan and Hickel (2025) argue that Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) facilitated the transfer of Africa's mineral wealth into the global capitalist economy without adequate compensation, deepening ecological destruction and socio-economic inequality across the continent. Contemporary debates on climate justice and "loss and damage" further frame reparations as a form of structural repair that includes ecological restoration, compensation, debt justice, and recognition of historically marginalised communities (Abraham, 2025). In this study, reparations are therefore understood not only in financial terms, but also through demands for environmental restoration, community wellbeing, social investment, and recognition of the disproportionate burdens borne by workers and mining communities within the Global South.

Taken together, regulation, redistribution, and reparations provide an integrated framework for analysing how mineworkers connect workplace struggles to broader questions of climate justice and just transition. The framework makes it possible to examine how workers interpret labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and uneven development not as isolated problems, but as interconnected dimensions of extractive political economies. It also enables analysis of how workers' demands move beyond immediate workplace concerns towards broader claims for democratic participation, environmental accountability, equitable development, and socially just transition processes.

The framework further highlights a central contradiction within the global green transition. While countries such as Zimbabwe are increasingly positioned as strategic suppliers of critical minerals required for decarbonisation, the conditions under which these minerals are extracted frequently reproduce labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and socio-ecological inequality. The key challenge, therefore, is not simply participation in the green transition, but how transition processes are governed, who benefits from extraction, and whether workers and affected communities are able to shape the terms of socio-ecological transformation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how mineworkers in Zimbabwe understand and articulate the relationship between labour rights and climate justice. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to examining lived experiences, meanings, and emergent forms of consciousness, especially in contexts where workers' perspectives are often marginalised in policy and academic debates (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants selected using purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were chosen based on their involvement in mining labour, trade union activity, and civil society engagement within Zimbabwe's extractive sector. The final sample comprised 18 participants, including mineworkers from Arcadia Mine, Bikita Minerals, and Hwange Colliery, trade union officials from the National Mine Workers Union of Zimbabwe (NMWUZ) and the Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Minerals Workers Union (ZDAMWU), and representatives from the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Participants' Information

No.	Company / Organisation	Status	Reference Code
1	Arcadia Mine	Mineworker	MW1
2	Arcadia Mine	Mineworker	MW2
3	Arcadia Mine	Mineworker	MW3
4	Arcadia Mine	Mineworker	MW4
5	Bikita Minerals	Mineworker	MW5
6	Bikita Minerals	Mineworker	MW6
7	Bikita Minerals	Mineworker	MW7
8	Bikita Minerals	Mineworker	MW8

9	Hwange Colliery	Mineworker	MW9
10	Hwange Colliery	Mineworker	MW10
11	Hwange Colliery	Mineworker	MW11
12	Hwange Colliery	Mineworker	MW12
13	NMWUZ	Trade Union Official	UO1
14	NMWUZ	Trade Union Official	UO2
15	ZDAMWU	Trade Union Official	UO3
16	ZDAMWU	Trade Union Official	UO4
17	CNRG	CSO Official	CSO1
18	CNRG	CSO Official	CSO2

Although the sample size is relatively small, the study prioritised depth over breadth, consistent with exploratory qualitative research concerned with meaning-making rather than statistical representativeness. Participants were drawn from strategically important mining sites and organised labour formations with active involvement in workers' struggles, enabling the study to capture diverse experiences of labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and climate justice within Zimbabwe's mining sector. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached, whereby recurring patterns relating to labour precarity, environmental injustice, regulation, redistribution, and reparative demands became consistently evident across participant narratives.

Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and remotely, with each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Given geographical dispersion and connectivity constraints, some follow-up interviews were conducted via WhatsApp using voice notes and recorded responses, a method recognised for its flexibility in qualitative research while maintaining reliable records for transcription and analysis (Seitz, 2016). The interview guide explored working conditions and labour rights, environmental impacts of mining, perceptions of climate change and climate justice, and the role of trade unions and civil society organisations in shaping just transition debates. In addition to interview data, the study drew on secondary materials, including policy documents, organisational reports, and advocacy publications.

Ethical clearance was obtained and all participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Given the politically sensitive nature of labour research within Zimbabwe's extractive sector, pseudonyms and reference codes are used throughout the article. The researcher's longstanding engagement with labour and social justice issues in Zimbabwe assisted in building trust with participants and navigating politically sensitive research environments. At the same time, reflexive attention was paid to the potential influence of the researcher's positionality and political commitments on data interpretation and representation.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The analytical process involved familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation through iterative comparison across interview transcripts. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives while also engaging with the study's analytical framework of regulation, redistribution, and reparations. Triangulation with

secondary reports and policy documents further strengthened the credibility and analytical rigour of the findings.

Findings

The findings show that sections of mineworkers are developing forms of climate justice consciousness through everyday experiences of labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and workplace insecurity. While civil society organisations play an important agenda-setting role, mineworkers are not passive recipients of these discourses. Rather, they are emerging as active agents articulating climate justice claims from below.

The analysis is organised around three themes derived through thematic coding: (i) workers' rights as a foundation for climate justice; (ii) the role of transnational labour networks in shaping climate consciousness; and (iii) the interaction between workers and civil society actors in advancing climate justice.

Together, these themes reveal both convergence and tensions between workers' immediate material concerns and climate justice agendas, while illustrating how workers' struggles align with the pillars of regulation, redistribution, and reparations.

1. Workers' Rights as a Foundation for Climate Justice (Regulation and Redistribution)

A central finding is that a section of mineworkers frames climate justice through workplace experiences of labour exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and weak regulatory enforcement. Rather than separating environmental concerns from labour struggles, workers interpret them as interconnected dimensions of extractive injustice.

As UO3 from ZDAMWU explained:

While lithium mining has generated employment opportunities for local communities, these benefits are undermined by poor labour conditions and weak enforcement of environmental and labour regulations. Chinese investors, who dominate large sections of Zimbabwe's mining sector, capitalise on high unemployment and employ most workers on short-term contracts. At major lithium operations such as Bikita Minerals in Masvingo and Arcadia Mine in Goromonzi, a large proportion of workers are either employed on temporary contracts or subcontracted (UO3, interview 2026).

Workers linked these conditions to insecure employment arrangements, subcontracting, and weak enforcement of labour protections within Zimbabwe's expanding lithium sector. Although the government introduced Statutory Instrument 71 of 2026 to restrict very short-term contracts, participants expressed scepticism regarding enforcement capacity and corporate compliance.

Workers, therefore, interpreted climate injustice not only through environmental degradation, but also through uneven regulatory power within extractive economies.

These concerns were reinforced by UO1 from NMWUZ, who noted:

In our petition, we highlighted the increasing worker abuse and the blatant disregard of labour laws and environmental standards by Chinese investors operating in Zimbabwe's mining sector (UO1, interview 2026).

UO1 added that such tensions are becoming more visible in the public sphere, where social media videos frequently depict violent confrontations between workers and Chinese employers.

The significance of these findings lies in how workers connect labour exploitation to broader questions of extractive governance and accountability. Climate justice is therefore understood not simply as environmental protection, but as a struggle over regulation, labour rights, and democratic participation within the green transition.

Workers' testimonies also revealed how occupational risks and environmental harm are experienced as mutually reinforcing. MW6 (interview 2026) stated: "We work with hazardous materials without proper protection, which results in chest infections and cancer."

These concerns extended beyond the workplace itself. Participants described pollution, unsafe blasting practices, and water contamination affecting surrounding communities, findings that align with reports from CNRG (2025) and EnviroPress (2025) documenting mining-related fatalities and environmental harm. Such experiences challenge narrow distinctions between labour and environmental issues by illustrating how workplace precarity and ecological degradation are embedded within the same extractive processes.

Workers also articulated clear redistributive demands centred on compensation, community development, and democratic control over mineral wealth. As MW7 explained:

The government must ensure that mining companies provide adequate compensation and resettlement support, including proper housing and investment in public infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and roads. Workers and affected communities should also participate meaningfully in decision-making processes concerning the governance and distribution of mineral wealth. (MW7, interview 2026).

This reflects a redistributive understanding of climate justice in which sections of workers and mining communities are beginning to demand a more equitable allocation of the social and economic benefits derived from extraction. Rather than viewing climate justice solely through environmental concerns, participants linked it to broader struggles over public infrastructure, livelihoods, and community wellbeing.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that mineworkers increasingly frame climate justice through demands for stronger regulation of labour and environmental standards, equitable redistribution of mineral wealth, and greater participation in extractive governance. The findings advance climate justice scholarship by showing how labour struggles constitute an important site through which climate justice consciousness is produced from below. They also contribute to labour sociology by illustrating how workers increasingly connect workplace exploitation to wider socio-ecological inequalities associated with green extractivism and just transition politics.

2. Transnational Labour Networks and the Formation of Climate Consciousness (Regulation, Redistribution, and Reparations)

A second theme concerns the role of regional and international trade union networks in shaping workers' understanding of climate justice. Engagement with international federations such as IndustriALL enabled sections of workers and union officials to connect local experiences of labour exploitation and environmental degradation to broader global dynamics of extractivism, inequality, and climate change.

As UO4 (interview 2026) explained: "The climate crisis is not only an environmental issue but also a social and economic justice issue." Participation in regional workshops and labour education programmes contributed to the politicisation of environmental concerns by linking climate change to capitalist extraction, labour exploitation, and unequal development. These findings suggest that climate justice consciousness is not produced automatically through environmental exposure alone, but is actively shaped through worker education, transnational solidarity, and labour organising. Climate justice, therefore, emerged not as an abstract environmental discourse but as a framework through which workers interpreted workplace insecurity, ecological degradation, and economic inequality.

This process was also evident in workers' accounts of environmental harm within mining communities. MW9 from Hwange Colliery stated: "Through IndustriALL workshops, I realised that the issues we were raising are directly connected to climate justice" (MW9, interview 2026).

Workers linked air pollution, blasting, and fears of environmental collapse to structural dynamics of extractive development and weak regulatory oversight. These accounts reveal how workers increasingly connect localised ecological harm to global processes associated with the green transition and unequal patterns of resource extraction.

At the same time, participants expressed ambivalence towards transitions away from fossil fuels. While workers recognised the environmental necessity of decarbonisation, they also feared exclusion from its economic benefits. As MW10 observed:

The transition away from coal cannot be abrupt, but should occur gradually alongside investments in clean energy and technologies that ensure workers are not displaced (MW10, interview 2026).

This reflects a redistributive understanding of climate justice centred on employment security, social protection, and equitable transition planning. Workers did not reject decarbonisation itself; rather, they challenged forms of transition that externalise economic risks onto labour while concentrating benefits elsewhere.

Echoing these concerns, UO3 warned that green transitions frequently generate new forms of labour insecurity:

These transitions, often celebrated in boardrooms and at international climate conferences, carry profound and painful consequences for workers on the ground including job losses, skills displacement,

deteriorating occupational health and safety conditions, and the erosion of hard-won labour protections (UO3, interview 2026).

Such concerns highlight growing worker scepticism towards transition processes that exclude labour from decision-making structures. The findings, therefore, reveal an important contradiction within green transitions: while decarbonisation is presented as environmentally progressive, workers fear that transition processes may reproduce existing inequalities if labour protections and democratic participation are absent.

Workers articulated demands aligned with reparative justice. MW11 (interview 2026) argued that mining corporations should contribute towards “clean energy provision and social development in Zimbabwe.” These demands extended beyond environmental protection to include questions of historical inequality, developmental justice, and social investment within mining communities.

Extending this critique, MW12 criticised the contradiction between global decarbonisation and local environmental destruction, arguing that countries such as Zimbabwe continue to bear disproportionate socio-ecological burdens despite contributing relatively little to global emissions. This reflects growing worker awareness of uneven global power relations within climate governance and increasing scepticism towards forms of green industrialisation dependent on environmentally destructive extraction in the Global South.

These findings therefore demonstrate that climate justice consciousness among mineworkers is actively produced through labour education, transnational organising, and regional solidarity networks. The findings advance climate justice scholarship by showing how workers interpret climate change not only as an environmental problem, but as a question of labour rights, unequal development, and democratic participation within transition processes. They contribute to labour sociology by illustrating how trade union networks facilitate the politicisation of environmental issues and the emergence of labour-centred forms of climate justice consciousness within extractive sectors.

3. Civil Society–Labour Alliances and the Expansion of Climate Justice Struggles (Reparations and Redistribution)

The third theme concerns the role of civil society–labour alliances in expanding workers’ engagement with climate justice beyond immediate workplace concerns. While mineworkers often prioritise wages, safety, and working conditions, collaboration with civil society organisations enabled broader reflection on extractivism, environmental degradation, and community wellbeing.

CNRG played an important role in this process through training programmes and campaigns focused on environmental justice, water governance, and community rights within lithium-mining regions. As CSO1 explained:

The CNRG has been engaged in climate justice campaigns focused on water governance in lithium-mining communities. Lithium extraction consumes significant quantities of water, contributing to water contamination and the depletion of local water sources (CSO1, interview 2026).

These concerns extended climate justice debates beyond the workplace itself by linking mining activities to broader questions of public health, agricultural livelihoods, and ecological sustainability. Civil society interventions, therefore, contributed to expanding workers' understandings of how extractive industries affect both labour and community reproduction.

Other civil society organisations are also actively contributing to climate justice advocacy and community mobilisation against extractivism in Zimbabwe, complementing CNRG's labour-oriented interventions. According to information shared on the Facebook page of ActionAid Zimbabwe, it also facilitated community dialogues around extractivism, displacement, environmental regulation, and benefit-sharing in mining communities such as Goromonzi and Bikita. These initiatives reinforced demands for greater accountability, transparency, and democratic participation within mining governance. The findings suggest that civil society organisations function not only as advocacy actors, but also as important mediators in politicising environmental issues within mining communities.

Participants further highlighted how these collaborations contributed to worker-led forms of climate justice advocacy. CSO2 noted:

Through the trainings, workers began questioning not only wages and working conditions, but also environmental destruction and the lack of meaningful community development (CSO2, interview 2026).

This demonstrates how labour struggles move beyond workplace-based demands towards structural critiques of extractive development. Rather than viewing labour exploitation and environmental degradation as separate issues, workers came to understand them as interconnected dimensions of unequal development within extractive economies.

This shift was particularly evident in MW1's account of how engagement with CNRG transformed their understanding of mining and development:

Although the mine created employment opportunities, the wages are low, and my initial concern was advocating for better pay and working conditions. However, through the training provided by CNRG, I came to understand how lithium mining, despite contributing to renewable energy projects, is simultaneously causing environmental destruction in our community. I now advocate not only for workers' rights, but also for clinics, hospitals, roads, clean water, and access to electricity (MW1, interview 2026).

Workers' demands therefore moved beyond wages and occupational safety towards redistributive claims centred on public infrastructure, social investment, and community wellbeing. These findings reveal how mineworkers increasingly interpret climate justice through demands for equitable development and meaningful participation in determining how mineral wealth is governed and distributed.

Extending this perspective, MW2 explained:

Through the CNRG trainings, we not only acquired skills but also gained confidence, and we are becoming leaders within the community, as we

advocate for our interests to be considered in the climate transition (MW2, interview, 2026).

This points to the emergence of workers not only as labour actors, but also as community-based climate justice advocates. The findings, therefore, illustrate how civil society–labour alliances contribute to new forms of political consciousness and grassroots mobilisation within extractive regions.

Union officials also linked climate justice organising to wider critiques of extractive development. As UO2 noted:

Communities were experiencing environmental degradation and displacement to pave the way for mining activities, yet no meaningful development or infrastructure was being created in these areas (UO2, interview 2026).

This reflects growing criticism of extractivist development models that prioritise mineral exports and foreign investment while neglecting social investment, ecological restoration, and community welfare. Participants therefore articulated claims aligned with reparative justice, particularly around displacement, environmental destruction, and the unequal burdens borne by mining communities.

At the same time, tensions remained within civil society–labour alliances. UO3 observed that unions frequently lacked the technical expertise and financial resources available to civil society organisations. This highlights an important contradiction within climate justice organising: although labour participation is expanding, trade unions continue to operate within unequal organisational and resource conditions that may constrain their influence within environmental governance processes.

These findings demonstrate that civil society–labour alliances play an important role in expanding workers' understandings of climate justice beyond immediate workplace concerns. The findings advance climate justice scholarship by showing how climate justice consciousness is shaped through collaboration between labour and civil society actors within extractive communities. They also contribute to labour sociology by illustrating how workers emerge as community-based political actors who connect labour struggles to broader demands for reparations, redistribution, environmental accountability, and democratic participation within just transition processes.

Discussion

Mineworkers, Climate Justice and the Just Transition

The findings demonstrate that mineworkers in Zimbabwe are developing labour-centred forms of climate justice consciousness grounded in their everyday experiences of labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and socio-economic marginalisation. Rather than treating workplace struggles and environmental concerns as separate issues, workers understand them as interconnected dimensions of extractive injustice embedded within Zimbabwe's integration into global green transition supply chains. In this sense, climate justice emerges not simply as an environmental discourse, but as a broader struggle over labour rights, democratic participation, and equitable development.

The study, therefore, challenges perspectives that position workers primarily as passive victims of environmental harm or as obstacles to decarbonisation processes. Instead, the findings show that mineworkers actively interpret, reshape, and politicise climate justice through workplace struggles, trade union organising, and alliances with civil society organisations. Workers' demands extend beyond wages and occupational safety to include environmental accountability, community wellbeing, redistribution of mineral wealth, and participation in shaping transition governance. Climate justice consciousness is thus socially produced through labour struggles, worker education, and experiences of extractive development.

These findings strongly align with emerging scholarship conceptualising climate justice through the interconnected dimensions of regulation, redistribution, and reparations (Lenferna, 2025; Gaughran, 2025; Manduna, 2024; Táíwò, 2022). Regulatory failures were evident in the weak enforcement of labour, occupational safety, and environmental protections, enabling corporations to externalise social and ecological costs onto workers and mining communities. Redistributive demands emerged through calls for fair wages, compensation, infrastructure development, and community benefits from mineral extraction. At the same time, workers articulated reparative claims centred on ecological restoration, recognition of displacement and environmental harm, and redress for the unequal burdens borne by mining communities within extractive economies.

The findings also illuminate a central contradiction within just transition politics in resource-dependent economies of the Global South. While the global demand for critical minerals such as lithium creates opportunities for investment, industrial upgrading, and employment creation, it simultaneously risks reproducing labour precarity, socio-ecological inequality, and environmentally destructive forms of green extractivism (Manduna, 2024; Táíwò, 2022). Recent investments in lithium beneficiation and processing in Zimbabwe illustrate this contradiction. Although such developments are presented as pathways towards economic growth and participation in global decarbonisation, workers' experiences suggest that the benefits of the green transition remain unevenly distributed, while labour exploitation and environmental degradation persist within mining communities.

The findings further contribute to debates within labour sociology and political ecology by demonstrating how workers increasingly connect local workplace struggles to broader global systems of unequal development and climate governance. Consistent with research on labour–environmental alliances in South Africa and other parts of the Global South (Satgar, 2015; Barca, 2019), Zimbabwean mineworkers have come to frame climate change as both an environmental and socio-economic justice issue. However, this study extends existing scholarship by showing how workers in a resource-dependent economy actively reinterpret climate justice from below through their lived experiences of extractivism, labour precarity, and uneven development.

Importantly, the findings suggest that workers do not reject decarbonisation itself. Rather, they contest forms of transition that externalise economic and ecological risks onto labour and mining communities while concentrating benefits elsewhere. Workers, therefore, advocate forms of transition centred on democratic participation, labour protections, social investment, and environmental accountability. In this regard, the

study highlights the importance of institutionalising worker participation within climate governance and just transition policy processes.

Overall, the study advances labour-centred climate justice scholarship by demonstrating that mineworkers are not peripheral to just transition politics, but are emerging as important political actors shaping alternative visions of socio-ecological transformation. Addressing the contradictions of green extractivism in Zimbabwe and similar resource-dependent economies, therefore, requires stronger labour and environmental regulation, equitable redistribution of mining revenues, ecological restoration, and meaningful worker participation in transition governance.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that climate justice in Zimbabwe is being shaped not only within policy and civil society spaces, but also through the everyday struggles of mineworkers themselves. Grounded in experiences of labour exploitation, unsafe working conditions, displacement, and environmental degradation, mineworkers are developing labour-centred forms of climate justice consciousness that connect workplace struggles to structural questions of democratic participation, equitable development, and environmental accountability.

The findings show that workers' experiences and demands align closely with the interconnected dimensions of regulation, redistribution, and reparations. Regulatory failures were reflected in weak enforcement of labour, occupational safety, and environmental protections, allowing corporations to externalise social and ecological costs onto workers and mining communities. Redistributive demands emerged through calls for fair wages, community development, public infrastructure, and more equitable allocation of the benefits derived from mineral extraction. At the same time, reparative claims were evident in demands for ecological restoration, compensation for displacement, and recognition of the unequal burdens imposed on mining communities within extractive economies.

The study also highlights a central contradiction within just transition politics in resource-dependent economies of the Global South. While the global demand for critical minerals such as lithium creates opportunities for economic growth and industrial development, the conditions under which these minerals are extracted frequently reproduce labour precarity, environmental degradation, and uneven development. The challenge, therefore, is not simply participation in the green transition, but how transition processes are governed, who benefits from extraction, and whether workers and affected communities can shape the terms of socio-ecological transformation.

By foregrounding mineworkers' experiences and agency, this article contributes to labour-centred climate justice scholarship in three important ways. First, it demonstrates that workers are not passive victims of environmental harm or obstacles to decarbonisation, but active political actors who increasingly reinterpret climate justice through everyday experiences of extractivism and labour precarity. Second, it shows how workplace struggles are becoming important sites for the production of climate justice consciousness from below. Third, it contributes to debates on green extractivism by illustrating how global decarbonisation efforts may simultaneously

reproduce new forms of socio-ecological inequality within mineral-dependent economies of the Global South.

The Zimbabwean case, therefore, demonstrates that a just transition cannot be reduced to technological change or market-driven environmental reforms alone. Rather, socially just transitions require stronger labour and environmental protections, democratic participation in transition governance, equitable redistribution of resource wealth, and attention to the historical and ongoing harms associated with extractive development. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of centring labour within climate politics and recognising mineworkers as key actors in shaping alternative socio-ecological futures.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.