



The Grangemouth Refinery Closure

Workers' Perspectives



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Co-chairs' introduction

Our remit tasks the Commission with “undertaking meaningful engagement with those most likely to be impacted by the transition” to a low carbon economy. So far we have done this principally through convening discussions of various formats with communities of place and interest around the country, from Stornoway to South Lanarkshire.

These conversations are central to the Commission’s method and approach, informing our strategic analysis and recommendations for action, and helping to build consensus among Commissioners who by design bring different backgrounds, perspectives and priorities.

High quality engagement on urgent and often complex just transition issues requires time, resource and skill to deliver, with the added challenge of achieving open dialogue on sensitive matters. As part of the Commission’s work on Grangemouth, we felt strongly that a special emphasis should be placed on the experiences of workers at the industrial site, so that their perspectives would directly inform our advice to government.

In preparing this report the Commission has instructed a small research team at the University of Glasgow, Dr Ewan Gibbs and Riyoko Shibe, to undertake this work on behalf of the Commission over recent months. We are very grateful for their work and the insights it has provided us with as we consider how we can make a just transition in Grangemouth a reality for those who work and live there.

This report contains critical insights from interviews with workers at Grangemouth and places their experience in its historical and economic context. We hope this research report will support policy-makers and others with decision-making power in shaping a transition for Grangemouth that is fair for the workforce at the site.



Professor Dave Reay
Co-Chair
Just Transition Commission



Satwat Rehman,
Co-Chair
Just Transition Commission

Synopsis

This report analyses reflections from a research project that recorded interviews with workers from the Grangemouth refinery and petrochemicals complex. Our interviews focused on responses to the November 2023 announcement by Petroineos that they intend to close the oil refinery in 2025. We have interviewed workers across age ranges who span across terminal, petrochemicals, refining and contracting positions.

Over and above important distinctions in their sense of their own economic security, workers universally reported not feeling consulted on major decisions regarding their future. They are concerned for the impact on the community in Grangemouth, Falkirk, Bo'ness and more largely across Central Scotland. There was a unified view that government at Scottish and UK level had failed to preserve economic and energy security or provide a pathway to a future which uses relevant skills to establish renewable energy employment at the site. Some workers had heard the term just transition before, but all were agreed that they were not experiencing one.



Grangemouth industrial complex

Research team's Introduction

In November 2023, Petroineos announced the closure of the Grangemouth oil refinery and its replacement with an oil import terminal by 2025. The replacement of refining with imported products was scheduled to come at the cost of around 400 jobs, reducing employment from 500 to 100 and removing around a fifth of total manufacturing jobs in the larger Grangemouth complex. This announcement came as a shock to workers and the local area, particularly in Grangemouth, Falkirk and Bo'ness where there are big concentrations of workers but also across a larger geographical area which extends across Scotland's Central Belt. Employment at Grangemouth has cohered communities and sustained relatively well-paid enduring jobs through decades marked by closures in other energy and manufacturing sectors in the surrounding area like coal mining, vehicles making and electronics.

In February and March 2024, we acted as independent researchers who had been commissioned to collect worker responses to the closure announcement. This briefing is based on interviews with eight workers. Seven presently employed by either Petronieos (who own the refinery) or INEOS (who own petrochemicals plants and terminals) and one contractor. The interviews focused on understanding how workers understood the closure announcement in terms of their own economic security and that of their colleagues along with what they thought a fair future for Grangemouth would look like.

In our interviews, some workers referred to the fate of coal and shipbuilding communities in the late twentieth century as examples that shaped their worries about how the refinery closure could take Grangemouth down a similar path of economic depression and adverse social impact. One worker remembered that period as having "left really quite a deprived area behind" across former industrial settlements. Another worker at the refinery, pointed to the impact of local pit closures in nearby West Lothian which "was affected in the 1980s with the coal mining thing, so we have seen this, sort of, scale of loss and what that means for our local communities. I think this will be as bad, if not worse."

The rest of this briefing firstly provides a historical context for the refinery closure announcement, emphasising the strong interdependencies between Grangemouth and refining and petrochemicals. It then reviews the key findings from the interviews, highlighting perspectives on Grangemouth as an industrial hub; differences and similarities across distinct functions and enterprises; intergenerational solidarity; the impact of an earlier phase of restructuring in 2020; uncertainty about the future; the centrality of local employment; worker views on a just transition; role of government; and discussion of alternative employment destinations. We conclude by focusing on the centrality of maintaining employment levels at the Grangemouth complex, which emerged as a strong theme in all of our interviews.



Members of the Just Transition Commission discuss the future of the industrial site at INEOS's Grangemouth office

Historical context

Grangemouth and its surrounding area have been central to industry and Scotland's energy economy since the eighteenth century. Iron founding, coal mining and the shale oil industry strongly moulded the local labour market into the early decades of the twentieth century. Thereafter, a major change began with the opening of the Grangemouth refinery by Scottish Oils Limited, a subsidiary of BP (then known as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company), in 1924. The refinery was oriented towards petroleum, primarily then imported from the Middle East.

A manufacturing complex developed in petrochemicals around the refinery. It was visible in the expansion of BP and ICI, who had originally located in Grangemouth around the same time. After the Second World War, Grangemouth was designated as a growth point by Scottish planners who identified the refinery and petrochemicals as part of a growing sector. It was an era of massively expanding plastics manufacturing and the period when oil fuelled aeroplanes, ships, cars and lorries began to dominate transport. Grangemouth's population grew significantly as a result.

Remembering back to this time, one worker at the refinery remarked that “the full community was industrial. It was an industrial heartland. There was a wealth of money you would literally walk out of school and you could get a job anywhere because there was that much opportunity. There was so much opportunity because there were so many industries here.”

New housing was built to accommodate workers displaced by the Glasgow ‘overspill’. Our interviewees included current refinery workers whose family had been part of the ‘clearances’ from Glasgow and found prosperity in Grangemouth. “People were leaving Glasgow to come here for work,” one interviewee who grew up in the town remembered, “because there was so much opportunity.”

From 1951 to 1971, Grangemouth's population grew from 15,432 to 24,569, but it then fell back, along with employment at the complex. In 2021, Grangemouth had a population of 16,240.^[1] Since the 1970s, international competition in petrochemicals, along with slower economic growth in the UK domestic market, has contributed to an end of the period of expansion. Nevertheless, the Grangemouth refinery and the chemicals industry were still viewed as a good place to work in a difficult industrial labour market context. The BP complex remained open when the last local foundries and collieries closed. It survived the departure of factories in technologically advanced industries in Bathgate like BMC's commercial vehicles factory in 1986 and Motorola's electronics plant in 2001. Many of our interviewees, like much of the workforce, were local and experienced these changes first hand.

In the mid-1950s, BP connected the Finnart terminal on the West Coast of Scotland to Grangemouth via pipeline. When BP began drilling oil in the North Sea, they further linked these operations to Grangemouth. In 1975, the Kinneil terminal was opened not far from the refinery, marking the end point of the Forties Pipeline System. Subsequently, BP sought to exit 'downstream' refining and chemical activities, selling Grangemouth to emergent chemical giant, INEOS, in 2005. Twelve years later, BP finalised their exit from Grangemouth by also handing over Kinneil to INEOS as they shifted towards exiting from their North Sea assets too. ICI broke up in 1993, leading to job losses but smaller successor chemicals companies are still active in the area. Through these changes, BP's impact on the town's culture remains today: "round about here it's still referred to as 'the BP' as you probably have heard and seen," commented one interviewee. Another worker emphasised their links to the industry though family connections to ICI and felt the company was strongly present in the Grangemouth and Falkirk when they were growing up.

Workplace relations changed after INEOS took over at Grangemouth. Several interviews referred to distinctions in culture between the BP era and the changes that came following the outcome of two major industrial disputes in 2008 and 2013. After 2013, the main union at the plant, Unite, lost status it had enjoyed for decades.^[2] Since then, some workers reported that they felt the relationship between the union and management has been restored to an extent: "the company kind of cut themselves off from the union in 2014", one interviewee commented, continuing that "the relationship is slowly being built again." Another interviewee echoed this, observing how since the dispute, "The union has probably grown from strength to strength to strength to the point where it's as strong as it's ever been." This context, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restructuring of the company, was crucial in setting the expectations that our interviewees held of their employer as well as disappointment with government regarding the operation of what they view as a strategic national asset.

Research base

We carried out eight interviews in response to the closure announcement. Interviews combined in person and remote discussions, each individually between a Grangemouth worker and one or both of the research team. The workers varied from their twenties to their sixties. We spoke to men and women who currently have job roles that extended across administrative, chemicals, refining and terminal roles along with a former contracting engineering construction worker. Most of our interviewees requested to remain anonymous. We are very grateful to the workers who spoke to us, and we have respected their choices by avoiding reporting details that could lead to them being identified. We would like to put on record though that we question how meaningful a dialogue can be had in contexts where workers are worried for the consequences that speaking to bona fide researchers and engaging with the Commission could have for their employment or careers. It raises important concerns over the realisation of a just transition in procedural terms, through open democratic discussion, as well as in terms of achieving a socially, economically and environmentally prosperous future. In the sections that follow, we comment on generalised findings based on identifying themes from across the interviews.

The industrial site at Grangemouth



Grangemouth as an industrial hub

The interviews strongly communicated that Grangemouth is a central node of Scotland's energy employment and industrial work and training. Several interviewees discussed Grangemouth as a destination for workers with skilled trades training or with backgrounds in the chemical industry. For instance, workers with decades of experience found work in Grangemouth during chemical plants closures elsewhere in Scotland in the twenty-first century. Refinery workers discussed being trained to run complex plant economically and safely and in specialised areas such as maintenance and shutdowns.

One worker likened Grangemouth to a “training ground” for industry, “a real hub for local people to get into the sector.” Refinery, chemicals and professional services jobs are considered locally to be “high paying, it's a skilled workforce, it makes people that work here enjoy their work, and it's a great route for people to come into a high paid job. There's not many similar jobs that pay the money, the terms and conditions that we've got.” Grangemouth is a crucial site in a Forth industrial labour market that includes the Mossmorran plant in West Fife but formerly extended to the now closed Longannet power station, which was just across the Firth of Forth from the petrochemicals complex. The closure of the Grangemouth refinery would diminish the economic security of contractors and firms who move between workplaces and from job to job along with placing the permanent workforce in jeopardy.

One interviewee emphasised the impact which the refinery closure would have on contractors, extending to the west coast of Scotland: “It's not uncommon for guys to travel from the likes of Greenock up to Grangemouth, so from Greenock, Paisley, Port Glasgow, all the way up that road, travel to Grangemouth.” In some cases, workers had “worked in it for a number of years now. They've been fortunate enough to just keep working there, they've fell into the repair and maintenance pool.” Grangemouth has sustained a “job at home” for workers who may now have to revert to becoming “travelling men” to find jobs at other large sites, such as the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing facility across the Anglo-Scottish border in West Cumbria.

Several workers underlined the importance of training offered to young apprentices at Grangemouth too. One explained employment at the complex is “a lifeline for many people. They came out of school and they were coming in here.” A younger interviewee who had served their apprenticeship at Grangemouth underlined the value they placed on the preparation it gave them for employment and the subsequent economic security they had enjoyed: “I became, as the majority of my colleagues did, a full-time employee at the site. If you look at the workforce today, the vast majority of that, especially in the last sort of ten years, have all been predominantly [from] apprenticeships.”

An older worker commented that unlike other employers, Ineos and Petroineos also encouraged their apprentices to remain committed to obtaining the relevant formal academic qualifications along with gaining distinctive workplace experience. They emphasised that apprentices “went through a Vocational Qualification on hydrocarbons, they did their Higher National Certificate at the same time. Their college work was as important as what their practical work was. I really thought they had a really high calibre of apprentices here; I was quite impressed with it.” Conversely, more critical perspectives included observations related to the perceived growing reliance on contractors reported by some interviewees. These diminished opportunities for training and investment in the workforce which would be considerably exacerbated by the closure of the refinery.



The Commission's roundtable event at Falkirk stadium brought together representatives of industry, business, community organisations and trade unions.

Distinct functions and businesses

Whilst the complex is interconnected, workers also underlined the economic and ownership distinctions within it. The refinery is owned by Petroineos, a partnership between INEOS and PetroChina, a Chinese state-owned oil company, whilst the rest of the site and related terminals are owned solely by INEOS. Historically, there had been a more unitary logic to the operation of a refinery-petrochemicals complex with respectively the former and latter acting as an insurance policy in cases of either high or low oil prices. Some INEOS workers were concerned for their future given they completed work connected to Petroineos.

The interconnectedness of the whole complex is a cause for concern, with the closure of the refinery having unknown repercussions for the whole workforce, not just that of the refinery. One worker commented, “within the site, you know, there are shared services which obviously we’re part of and there are other departments [we] are part of. The workers in the chemicals are well aware what the impact will be if the refinery stops manufacturing.” Another observed that “even in areas which would make up that distribution terminal. I don’t think there’s a safe job out there. I don’t think anybody feels that they’re in a safe job.” These fears of precarity were compounded in the view of a different interviewee by the need “open that picture bigger” and look at “the thousands of contractors” and “that wider supply chain, procurement, the people that we use as third-party services, the people that we buy materials from.”

Uncertainty further related to the future of Finnart terminal which is presently used to import oil and export refined products. Another important disconnection pointed to in interviews was between Kinneil and the rest of the site. Grangemouth primarily imports cheaper oil from international markets rather than being supplied from the North Sea oil, which is overwhelmingly exported.

Intergenerational solidarity

Discussion on the value of apprenticeships and the future of work in the plant strongly evidenced forms of intergenerational solidarity. This also related to the importance of local employment, and concern that if the refinery closed it would lead to a lasting removal of valuable jobs from Central Scotland. Older workers were often motivated by worries over the fate of younger workers when it came to the future of the plant. “You see the older generation who were maybe going to be retiring in two, three, four, five years’ time, that they’re not as alarmed,” one worker commented, “but the younger generation are alarmed. People have just bought houses, have mortgages, they’re just wondering what to do now.” Similarly, several workers noted how the younger generation would not experience the opportunities they had. “It’s a shame for the young people that are coming up, you know, the young folks who are growing up in the area and maybe won’t have the same chances that the generation before them have had in terms of employment and building a life for themselves.” “I’ve got a son,” another said, “he should be able to have those opportunities as well. If you’re losing an industrial base, a large industrial base, then it just means it’s an opportunity that’s not available for them.”

In some cases, workers explained that they would be prepared to discuss taking redundancy to ensure that younger workers were able to continue working: “There were apprentices on site whose futures were unsure. If moving saved an apprentice’s position then I was quite willing to move.” These dimensions though also related to distinctions in lengths of service which did not always neatly map on to age. Given Grangemouth’s role as a hub, some older workers had not worked there long enough where they felt able to countenance a redundancy leading to some form of early retirement.

2020 Restructuring

In November 2020, Petroineos closed a Crude Oil Distillation Unit along with a Catalytic Cracking Unit, which cost 200 refinery jobs. Workers explained redundancies were blamed on the poor trading conditions in the context of declining demand for oil during COVID-19. Contemporaneous reporting points to both units having been previously closed on an interim basis during the pandemic.[3] These job losses were accompanied by plans for investment in hydrogen production and carbon capture and storage known as Grangemouth Renaissance. It incorporated proposals for a lower emission New Energy Plant as part of a “journey to net zero”[4]. The refinery closure announcement was seen by several workers to counteract these promises. One interviewee explained that those worker who remained in post following the restructure had hoped for a “golden era” for Grangemouth, “to see where we go next.” The announcement of the refinery closure, however, “meant a lot of heads have dropped, a lot of people have stood by through thick and thin during these difficult periods.”

In the view of the members of the workforce we spoke to the refinery closure announcement hampers plans for investment and reduces the base of carbon production which could be used as a basis for carbon capture projects.[5] Those objections were encouraged by the context of the high profits INEOS reported following the oil price recovery in 2022. One worker articulated their experiences as such:

“It was a shock to, I think, almost everyone because 2020, we were told by our managers and by some senior managers that the place was going to be the industrial heart of Scotland, they were investing money. INEOS had promised they were going to invest a billion into a new biorefinery. They said they were going to build a new power station and they’d said they were going to spend all this money and this was going to be the new green future of Scotland. We were actually swayed by some of the managers not to leave. We were told not to leave and not to go to other companies like Mossmorran or not to go offshore because this was where the workforce would be needed.”

Another interviewee spoke to the changes in the workplace following the restructure for those who stayed on: “when the site went through the reorganisation and they were losing colleagues, you know, in some roles you were asked to do more. That has an impact on people, so it feels, you know, the heads go down a little.”

Uncertainty

The abrupt nature of the closure announcement has contributed to a marked sense of uncertainty. “It’s just unsettling, isn’t it?” remarked one worker, capturing the sentiment held across interviewees. None of our interviewees felt that the workforce was consulted by management before important decisions were made. Some workers were comparatively sanguine in accepting this as part of the workplace structure under ownership by INEOS and Petroineos. One interviewee said they were glad management “came to the workers first, and that’s all we’d really asked for them to do. It was never great news, but at least we were spoke at the same time as, kind of, senior management.”

Others though felt more conflicted about it. The form of communication was discussed in exasperated terms: “We were being told, as our manager at the time said, it is not if, it is when [the closure will take place]. I have absolutely no idea who made this decision. It just seems ludicrous.” One worker commented on how disappointed they were “with the lack of communication and the lack of clear planning”, and that “we get told one thing and then we get told something completely contradictory by the line managers and then different managers tell us different thing.” Another interviewee echoed this saying, “the company give you information and when you ask questions, they don’t have answers.”

There was uncertainty about where decisions were made, although the consensus was that key decisions about the refinery’s future were made far from Grangemouth. An interviewee emphasised the joint shareholding status of Petroineos that they had “no doubt that these decisions are being made remotely, these could even be in board rooms in China itself.” They added that “you’d maybe say they’re a silent shareholder. I mean, there are some representatives that do come and do visits and there’s some that work there,” although they themselves did not have any significant involvement with them directly.

Not knowing what the future holds was reported as impacting mental health and wellbeing, with workers enduring a “lack of certainty” and “a lot of sleepless nights”. One worker underlined that “there is nothing decided yet. Nobody has got any dates, nobody has got any [idea] what positions will be available, nobody has got any information on how they are going to structure it.” These uncertainties related to questions over the skills and types of jobs which would be demanded at the refinery and a redeveloped terminal operation at Finnart given at present both sites run twenty-four hours per day. The refinery operation demands a level of activity and maintenance work which would not be replicated at a replacement import terminal. This anxiety resonated for those who do not expect to be directly impacted: “I’m wondering what will happen with me,” one respondent said. Another added “I have been told I’m not directly affected, but I’ll probably be indirectly affected.”

The sense of workers being unable to plan for their own life and their families was underlined in several interviews. One worker commented that they want to “make a quantified decision whether I want to stay and see it out or jump” but cannot do so due to the lack of details or a clear timetable. Heightened precarity is being felt by contract workers who are facing the prospect of contracts not being renewed and their firms scrambling to send workers from Grangemouth to other jobs. Contractors who have been retained are often based locally or within daily commuting distance of Grangemouth, such as in Glasgow, are now left facing having to take jobs at distant sites. This repeated prior patterns such as during the 2013 industrial dispute when there were large scale layoffs in contracting firms at the complex. A worker who was among those who lost their job during the industrial dispute in 2013 reflected that this time around, contractors “that live in Grangemouth, they’re going to have to travel one way or another whether it’s to the shipyards or up to Mossmorran or to other places, they’ll be travelling further than what they do at this moment in time.”

The industrial site at Grangemouth



Local employment

The overarching need to retain skilled unionised jobs at Grangemouth came across strongly in interviews, but this also linked to the wider footprint of the plant. Beyond the 2,000 jobs directly associated with the manufacturing complex, interviewees also pointed to the larger reliance of the town's economy on the complex. These varied from bespoke engineering suppliers to hotels and caterers through to the burger vans, pubs, restaurants and the shops where workers spend their wages. In one interviewee's opinion, as a local resident from the surrounding area, "the point that has really been missing is the local B&Bs, the local shops, the local café that some of us will of course get our lunch from, that type of thing." This was echoed by other workers:

"Grangemouth is dependable for people. If there's no people coming up there and going into digs, there's not as many shutdowns, that's going to hit the hospitality, the bed-and-breakfast. It's going to hurt everything right across the hospitality [sector]."

One worker evocatively described seeing floods of orange overalls through the shopping precincts of the town and indicated they felt that there was a strong resonance and mutual respect between workers and the rest of the residents: "There's a lot of respect for the guys that do work in here because of the amount of money they put into the local economy. You go to the shopping centre and it's just full of overalls from either contractors or staff from the refinery." Another worker discussed how workplace culture was integrated with the community: "On a Friday we'll have like a local snack van that we'll go to just to, for a bit of morale for the guys but, also, it boosts the local businesses, and all the local shops and that, they all benefit from that as well."

It was the removal of the crucial site from the local labour market which most concerned interviewees. They pointed to the reported potential of hydrogen and carbon capture at Grangemouth but were concerned by what they saw as the lack of progress or investment, or replacement for jobs set to be lost in carbon-intensive activities. Workers' perspectives were shaped by the decline in North Sea employment after the 2014 oil price downturn. They worried about repeating the same experience. Large numbers of workers relocated, often working abroad. One worker pointed to the impact in the North East of Scotland, which informed their worry for Grangemouth's future:

“If you go up to the Moray coast I think for a period of time, the generation maybe just beyond mine was all going into the oil industry and managed to sustain that way. But that’s all going now, I would say. If not completely gone, it’s certainly depleting, and then you’re left with places which are, like, really, really struggling.”

Another interviewee remembered that as employment fell in the North Sea, workers relocated to the Caspian oilfields, filling up flights from Aberdeen to Baku. That came at a cost in their view though. Future opportunities would not be available to younger men and women even as their previous generation was able to take the skills it had learnt in Scotland elsewhere to maintain relatively high earnings.

Many of our interviewees were unwilling to move to remain in oil and gas, pointing to local connections and family commitments in the area. One underlined that “I know the wages are quite good, but there’s other places that the skills the guys have got, they could get a job elsewhere, but the guys are here for reasons. It may be family; it may be obligations here.”

Summing up the sentiment, another worker emphasised that “we’ve got a community that’s been built round the site, we’ve got skills and we’ve got people that work there, we’ve got the infrastructure there, why should we not have these jobs when the times comes to move to these industries, *why can we not have it at Grangemouth?*”

Just transition

Retained employment was central to understandings of what a fair future for Grangemouth would look like across all of the interviews. Just transition was interpreted by one of our interviewees as a “social contract” between workforces, government and industry to ensure stability and shared commitment which would minimise industrial upheaval:

“If an employer can transition you know, then they should have a responsibility to do that responsibly, taking workers with them. There’s a bit of a social contract there, you know, look after your workforce, et cetera. The government ultimately need to create an environment for employers to be able to do that, and government need to make sure that happens.”

Other interviewees strongly articulated their attachment to local employment but not necessarily to their present sector. One said that they supported efforts towards a transition to renewables, adding that “it’s not that I’m particularly invested personally in the oil industry, it’s just that that’s what happened to provide work for me.” Another explained that as a younger worker they understood that the transition towards renewables would take place across their working lifetime, and they were not hostile to this: “When you talk about 2040, you talk about 2050, these targets for net zero, I realise that that is going to be within my working career. These transitions they’re talking about, they’re talking about me. They’re talking about my career and my future and obviously some of my colleagues.”

Yet several other respondents also pointed towards retained demand for Grangemouth’s refined products such as petrol and aviation fuel. Underinvestment at Grangemouth and other British refining capacity raised concerns over the future of energy security in light of the political and economic climate created since Russia invaded Ukraine. Broadly, interviewees argued a longer transition, retaining the refinery for several further years to meet current demand, would create a more stable platform to build renewables from. This was summed up by a worker who said that “the refinery has to continue refining to be part of that, for these new low carbon solutions to come online. To me, that’s the closest you’ll get to a just transition for this site.”

Respondents were optimistic that renewable opportunities would arise but questioned the pace at which this was feasible. “There are low carbon solutions, you know, the blue hydrogen, carbon capture storage, all that kind of stuff, the biorefining, it would be good to see all that,” one worker said, continuing that “I’m optimistic to think that will happen, but as I say, I don’t think that’s going to be any time soon. Unfortunately, I think there’ll be a bad spell before we get to that.” Another said, “I would be quite happy to move to a job in a green economy if it were available. But I suppose realistically, that’s not quite what happens when there’s a change like that.” One of their colleagues added to this: “everyone keeps saying it’s going to go green. There’s opportunities out there but nobody just seems to want to put their name or put a policy to it. There seems to be a lack of, kind of, I don’t know, foresight from anybody to stand up and say, this is going to happen.”

None of the workers we interviewed were climate change deniers or opposed in principle to a future energy transition. “We’re not dinosaurs,” one of them stated, before explaining that “we understand that times are changing but the decision to close the place is a fast-paced decision it’s purely that jobs will go to other countries. And the workers will suffer.” Another commented on the climate fears they faced each day: “I think I’ve got as much climate anxiety as anybody else. You know, you hear these things, and you just think, ah, you know, what world are we leaving for our children. So, you know, I don’t have any invested interest in destroying the planet more than anyone else. If we can make a go of green energies, then I think that would be fantastic.”

Several of our interviewees had heard of the just transition, but others had not. This matches trends from research with offshore North Sea oil and gas workers which similarly reported an increasing awareness of the term in recent years. Grangemouth workers expressed similar feelings in other respects too, mirroring their disappointment with corporate and government inaction towards achieving a transition.^[6] The collective understanding of the symbiosis between a fair future, a just transition and local employment was summed up by a worker who said that their colleagues were “moving to the Middle East, they’re moving to the North East of Scotland. They’re moving offshore, they’re moving to the Shetlands, and therefore it’s not a just transition in my view if we’re moving to these jobs.”

Government

Many interviewees contended that the Scottish and British government had greater responsibility than INEOS or Petroineos when it came to the future of Grangemouth. This sentiment sprang from the view that INEOS and Petroineos were acting as a profit-seeking business would be expected to respond to shareholder and profitmaking priorities: “The employer will make initial decisions based on money, I mean, that’s just the whole point of businesses, they’re there to make money,” a worker summarised. They clarified that in their view “it shouldn’t be profit before people, and that’s where I think government, kind of, plays a role, and government should be turning round and saying, you know, you have to make a commercial decision, but that should be well scrutinised. And I feel that doesn’t happen, so again, government’s got a lot to answer to, really.” Another worker echoed this: “we’re not seeing any positive vibes from the Government just now, Scottish Government.”

The Scottish Government has discussed the need for a just transition in the Just Transition for the Grangemouth Industrial Cluster plan.^[7] Some respondents were aware of the plan but those who were, along with those who were not, did not feel consulted and more pressingly felt it was insubstantial in terms of producing the investment required to achieve its aims. After noting the existence of the plan, one interviewee said that,

“There’s no, kind of, meat on the bones there, there’s not a path. If there’s going to be a just transition, it should be able to say to any worker, you know, this is where you are, and this is where we see you being, and this is how you’re going to get there. Or, you know, we’ll retrain you, and this is how we’ll retrain you and there’s none of that. So, I’ve no confidence in a just transition, and I’ve not really seen one that’s credible.”

Another interviewee simply said that they were “sceptical” of current political commitments in Scotland, which more broadly summarised the attitude of our respondents. A worker who was strongly aware and critical of recent initiatives, commented that “I’m also now hearing that the Scottish Government are talking about a Grangemouth just transition plan which may be published in the spring.” They added “There’s an argument that that should have been published years ago, you know what I mean. It all seems like it's been plenty talking and it all seems to be me like it’s coming far too late.” This related to frustration which they also felt towards existing initiatives for the town: “We’ve got a Future Industries Board that’s come out of hiding and I'm sceptical whether it’s fit for purpose. I think to myself, you’ve been speaking about just transition and net zero for years, I mean, years and years and years. Why are we now just getting to a stage where we’re going to publish plans? Because what I worry is when that plan comes, it might be too late.” Other interviewees discussed nationalisation with one suggesting the plant ought to be taken into public hands if the current owners saw no future in it. Another worker summarised the sense that Grangemouth ought to be subject to a greater extent of public control and ownership, saying they:

“Feel that if something’s hugely important as a piece of infrastructure to the country, maybe it shouldn’t be something that’s privately run. I don’t know. Because obviously, the private sector’s always going to be about profits. So, if you’re running something to continually take the maximum that you can out of it, you know, are you going to be investing for the future or are you going to run things down?”

Alternative employment

Perspectives on seeking alternative employment varied by life stage and occupation. These ranged from confidence of finding suitable work within travelling distance of home through to weighing up more distant options and foreseeing difficult choices. Interviewees with a prior history in moving jobs identified sectors including chemicals and the drinks industry as having connections to plant maintenance and other skills crossovers with Grangemouth. One worker hopefully explained that “There is a huge link between the oil and gas industry, the chemical industry, the drinks industry because it is all similar technology that is used in the processes. Hydrocarbon is alcohol, chemicals, so I was quite confident that I could find another position somewhere.”

The oil and gas industry also loomed large over discussions of alternatives. Life offshore was not an attractive proposition to several interviewees who pointed out its cost in terms of family life and patterns of job instability. One interviewee referred to going offshore as “A massive upheaval. Especially if you have got a young family and what not because you miss all the important dates.” Another worker echoed this. “I didn’t class myself as, you know, one of these, kind of, transient workers that would just go wherever the work was for me. I wanted to go home, you know, so for me, that was never an option.” The same interviewee expressed anxiety about not being able to continue in oil and gas because of the absence of comparable jobs in the local area: “There’s not another oil refinery nearby, so for me, it’ll be a career change. There isn’t anything really there, so I’ve not got any confidence in leaving here and then thinking I’ll get another oil and gas job.”

Contractors who have in some cases enjoyed relatively stable work at Grangemouth are worried by the prospect of having to travel further for shorter duration work. It was likely contractors would face travelling far for less permanent work at locations like the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station building site in Somerset on the South coast of England. Such a move would come at considerable costs in terms of travelling times. Unlike Grangemouth, not all prospective jobs are covered by the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry ‘Blue Book’ agreement. Several of the interviewees also conveyed doubts about opportunities available in renewables in Scotland. One of them explained that “none of my colleagues have got any jobs whether it’s to do with wind, whether it’s to do with solar or whether it’s to do with energy for waste plants.” Where such jobs were available, “you just need to go on Indeed or LinkedIn and you’ll just see that, and where they are present you’ll see that there’s a big difference in terms and conditions.”

Other workers pointed to the low levels of employment in turbine manufacturing, with one commenting “all these contracts have been shipped to other countries. So, that gives us no hope, that we can’t even secure the jobs for the wind farms that are in our own country.” Another interviewee underlined difficulties also in workers moving between wind and carbon energy sectors, emphasising that qualifications were not always portable which created difficulties and costs for contract workers. These findings augment prior research with workers made redundant at Rolls Royce’s Inchinnan plant, who experienced similar difficulties in transferring to offshore wind, despite a willingness to do so.[8] They also accord with statistical trends demonstrating persistently low stagnating and even falling levels of employment in renewables, especially in manufacturing.[9]

Whilst older interviewees were more likely to be disappointed that their hopes for future employment that would take them towards retirement have been jeopardised, younger workers weighed up longer-term decisions. A flow of workers from Grangemouth abroad, including to plants in the Middle East, was reported, particularly during and following the 2013 dispute. Some workers remembered that oil companies had held jobs fairs in the town offering attractive wages and conditions for work at Middle Eastern refineries whilst others emphasised that several of their colleagues had left to take up such opportunities. One worker reported his whole team were considering leaving Scotland in light of the recent closure announcement: “Everyone in my team is looking elsewhere now, not always to oil and gas but they’re looking at maybe going back to construction or they’re looking to go elsewhere, other countries. I believe some of them are looking to the Middle East and Asia as well.”

Conclusion

This research has found that Grangemouth workers feel insecure and devalued by the announced refinery closure. They do not feel consulted on crucial decisions about the future of their workplace. The closure announcement compounded disappointment for refinery workers who had already experienced restructuring and redundancies in 2020, which had been blamed on the then poorly performing oil market. A sense of frustration and anger with what was viewed as government sloganeering regarding the potential for a just transition and using Grangemouth and other fossil fuel skills bases to further renewables was a notable feature of several interviews.

One interviewee underlined their experience of a heightened sense of climate anxiety in relation to their role in the oil industry. Our interviews also collectively demonstrate that Grangemouth workers are concerned about their future and the potential role that they should play in an energy transition. Achieving that would take considerable public intervention in their eyes, including securing an extension to the life of the refinery. Overwhelmingly, for the workers we spoke to, a fair future meant the retention of secure, highly skilled, local employment in Grangemouth. This would reciprocate the commitment apprentices and workers have demonstrated to their employer and the national economy. It would also reinforce Grangemouth's role as an industrial hub, providing employment for core staff and contractors who commute from across a large swathe of Scotland.



Cliff Bowen from Unite addressing participants at the Commission round table event held in Falkirk Stadium

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