

## ***LABOR AND ENVIRONMENT***

### **Uniting to Win: Labor-Environmental Alliances**

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A mainstay of capitalist power is the capacity to divide those who would oppose it. Large numbers of potentially progressive groups, parties, movements, and constituencies regularly tend to clash, more often than not missing opportunities for cooperation and the achievement of a critical mass capable of affecting change. The questions arise: why should, why don't, and how could these different political agents work together in order to achieve their individual and shared goals? This paper attempts to explore some major aspects of these issues as they apply to the cooperation between the labor and environmental movements, primarily in United States. My intention with respect to the U.S. here is neither to analyze nor document the specific landscape of labor-environmental interaction in that country, only to focus certain broader insights concerning the problems and dynamics of this interaction in developed Western countries more generally.

The goals of the strategic orientation I propose are twofold: first, to develop a broad alliance against neoliberalism; second and simultaneously, to potentiate a "deeper," more radical grassroots coalition of class-based environmental justice organizations with the rank-and-file of labor. The basic rationale for such an alliance is to induce concerted action to seriously challenge hyper-exploitation and social and environmental destruction. The extent and speed of these destructive trends require the broadest realistic "united front" to exploit internal systemic contradictions in order to find basic openings for deeper democratic change. The grassroots perspective is indispensable in order to both counter attempts to co-opt and erode these broad alliances and advance the movement for deeper social, economic, and environmental change. These are the primary points of contact between these separate organizational and strategic levels.

#### **Reasons to Cooperate**

Environmentalists are workers' obvious potential allies in their efforts to advance workplace health and safety, and also to tackle environmental concerns of working-class communities, for workers bear the brunt of environmental degradation and destruction, both in terms of health and quality-of-life issues. Environmental sustainability and resource conservation are also in the interest of workers' quality of life. In turn, workers can employ their organizational strength in unions, coalitions, and as voters. They can also invoke the threat and power to withhold their labor in order to advance environmental issues. As Jones notes, "unions are uniquely well positioned to engage the sustainability agenda, both at work and in the wider community." Obach warns that "[e]ven the largest environmental organizations are incapable of advancing policies without the support of others both inside and outside the environmental community." More generally, Steedly and Foley concluded that the support of other organizations is the second most important factor in determining movement success.

Obach remarks that the combination of union resources with a more favorable public perception of environmental activities, which are often seen as less narrow and less self-serving than union activity, can be particularly effective. Large national environmental organizations are typically based on a "white-collar" membership and carry considerable resources and financial power. In some cases, these large non-governmental organizations are the only social actors capable of forcing certain urgent environmental issues onto the public stage in the mass media, broader civil society, and in governmental and intergovernmental policy agendas.

In general, alliances create a new power dynamic, where unity acts as an encouragement to

movement participants, a threat to opponents, and a pressure to power figures. During the 1970s, a labor-environmental coalition in the U.S. helped usher in a new era in environmental legislation: the Toxic Substance Act (1976), the revised Clean Water Act (1977), the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act (1978), and the Superfund Act (1980).

Finally, deep structural changes needed for the establishment of an economically just, environmentally sustainable society will require a broad united movement for democratization in order to achieve mass legitimacy. This will presuppose a certain regroupment and the creation of new organizational actors in some cases, but often also internal change within mainstream organizations. Therefore, progressive forces will also need to engage with this process of internal organizational reform.

### **Relevant Conjunctures**

At a moment when uniting against growing common challenges gains increasing rationale, panic and confusion can provoke an “everyone for themselves” mentality, where actors abandon broader progressive policies and assume only the more direct, minimal demands. Groups are likely to be more capable of expanding their agenda and inter-movement ties when they are not on the defensive. Conversely, it is harder to focus on secondary goals when the central issues of the organization are under attack. The neoliberal counter-offensive—a backlash against regulation—brought panic and disarray, splitting the anti-corporate forces. In this climate of defeat, labor began granting major concessions to the corporations. Kazis and Grossman pointed out the main effect of this response nearly 30 years ago: “[A]s long as people remain afraid of losing their jobs, they will be vulnerable to job blackmail.”

At the beginning of the neoliberal counter-assault in the early 1980s, labor and environmental leaders worked together to help create state-based networks in order to jointly challenge former U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s deregulatory push. A major victory during that time—the right-to-know legislation regarding the use of toxic substances in workplaces and communities—came as a result of a united campaign.

A generally conservative attitude regarding the labor-environmental alliance on the part of unions was understandable considering the decline in their old manufacturing base. This decline—also part of the general neoliberal assault—made the protection of jobs a top priority. The rise of neoliberalism in the context of an energy crisis transformed the context of industrial relations. This coincided with the further entrenchment and co-optation of union bureaucracy, the development of the doctrine of non-assertive “social partnership” with employers and the state, and the concomitant rise of service-style unionism. This type of trade unionism strengthens the role of union bureaucracy as a corporate-like service provider, while abandoning the necessity and practice of workers’ self-emancipation. In the U.S. labor movement, the crisis was characterized by deindustrialization; deunionization; a decrease in the benefits of union membership; the end of pattern bargaining and its replacement with concessionary bargaining; the introduction of two-tier wage systems according to seniority, which led to internal union wage gaps and a reduction in workers’ solidarity; a decline of industrial unionism and of the number and influence of shop stewards; and a more general fall in living standards, which was most clearly manifested through an increase in poverty levels and a decrease in home ownership. These grim developments have, however, also released a creative response towards strategic innovation and a more assertive social unionism. Inevitably though, these developments coexist with more narrow forms of self-interest and a more economic focus strictly on “bread and butter” issues. But at the same time, there have been significant changes in working-class attitudes towards the environment as a result of greater media attention to the contentious issue of environmental protection.

Although powerful environmental and labor organizations in past years often shied away from joining coalitions, their professional leadership, relative security vis-à-vis other groups, and a mentality

focused on furthering their position can actually function as an incentive for coalition formation. On the other hand, marginality tends to breed an isolationist, sectarian mentality, which closes the vicious circle of defeat. As a result, growing insecurities and competition caused by the neoliberal “race to the bottom” have provoked outbursts of chauvinism, xenophobia and parochialism among the working class, which has hindered the potential for meaningful progressive action and the development of broad, inclusive, and creative alliances. Still, the vast economic and environmental destruction and degradation caused by neoliberalism has produced a longing for alternatives among sizeable sections of the population, forcing them to mobilize in defense of their rights and conditions. The issue of “free trade” can therefore also provide common ground for labor-environmental action. The so-called “Teamsters and Turtles” alliance against the expansion of unrestricted trade helped disrupt the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999 and marked a symbolic birth of this new epoch of social struggles.

### **Labor-Environmental Conflict: the Myths, the Realities, and the Implications**

Despite the popular narrative of conflict—i.e., jobs vs. the environment—environmentalism is integral to the history of the labor movement. Unions were among the earliest supporters of clean water and clean air legislation and played a significant role in the enactment of environmental regulation. Though this was mainly done around public health issues, unions have also supported broader demands. For instance, in 1958 along with conservationists, the AFL-CIO supported the creation of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The American Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) often led campaigns for improved health and safety conditions and legislation, since its members were (and remain) particularly exposed to lethal and potentially lethal toxins. OCAW aggressively lobbied for the passage of the Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act, and the Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act, both of which became law in 1972. Indeed, the union’s assertive approach to health and safety issues contributed to the increase in its membership from 161,000 in 1965 to 175,000 in 1971. It also helped initiate one of the first big labor-environmental alliances in the U.S., a strike and a nationwide consumer boycott against Shell, which was refusing to provide health and safety protection to its workers. By that time, 90 percent of Shell’s production process was already automated. The union hence suspected a strike couldn’t force the company to accept its demands and sought outside help. In an effort to shed its image as an elitist group unresponsive to the needs and concerns of ordinary working Americans, the Sierra Club endorsed the OCAW strike and boycott against Shell along with eleven other major national environmental organizations. However, many Sierra Club members, opposing any sort of intrusion into “labor-management relations,” attacked its leadership for endorsing the boycott against Shell.

Resentment often runs deep on both sides. Some major U.S. environmental organizations abandoned labor in the 1990s and gave their support to NAFTA (namely the National Wildlife Federation, World Wildlife Fund, the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Resources Defense Council, and the National Audubon Society). More recently, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Auto Workers lobbied in favor of George W. Bush’s call for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, and the AFL-CIO endorsed it. Some unions, such as the United Mine Workers, also opposed the Kyoto Protocol, unable to grasp that “[i]f labor resists adapting to climate change, business will adapt in ways that leave workers and the public holding the bag. Also, if unions don’t work with environmental groups sympathetic to their issues, then business-oriented environmental groups will more likely set the agenda.” However, the AFL-CIO position has recently begun to move towards a somewhat more ecologically informed policy on this issue, while some, like the United Steel Workers, who along with the Sierra Club founded the Blue-Green Alliance in 2006, have long since taken an actively environmentalist stance on a range of issues, such as the regulation of toxic waste, air and water pollution, and “right-to-know” laws.

The corporate mass media commonly portray labor-environmental relations as a trade-off

between jobs and the environment. As Goodstein has written:

Industry opponents of environmental measures will typically fade into the background and carry on low-profile lobbying, while workers are presented as the public face of environmental opposition. Often cast as issues of jobs versus the environment, these conflicts have captured the most attention and have helped to shape the perception that environmental protection is antithetical to economic expansion, job preservation, and the interests of workers generally.

This corporate and media spin has been very effective in reinforcing this false dichotomy.

Conflicts between unions and environmental organizations have also developed over issues like higher fuel economy standards for automobiles, nuclear energy, reduction in the use and creation of toxic substances and pollutants, and restrictions on development.

Because workers are forced to sell their labor power to employers in order to ensure their livelihoods, their interests become tied to the company and the employer who pays their wages. This dependency leads to a common interest with the employer in preserving the company and its profitability in order to preserve their jobs and wages. Job losses have been especially heavy in the manufacturing, construction, and extractive sectors in many developed countries, Britain in particular. Such concerns—especially considering neoliberal strategies of outsourcing and capital flight—must be taken seriously by the environmental community.

Most research has concluded that environmental protection actually has a positive effect on levels of employment. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the overall impact of environmental regulatory policies is “slightly positive” with regard to job levels. Furthermore, in the U.S., employment created through environmental policies is disproportionately “blue-collar,” especially when compared to the rest of the workforce. According to Kazis and Grossman:

Environmental protection not only creates jobs, it also *saves* jobs ... [F]orestry, tourism, agriculture, and the growing leisure and outdoor recreation industries are all important sources of jobs which depend directly upon clean water, clean air, and wilderness for their continuation and growth ... [I]t is likely many jobs would have been eliminated in these industries had the environmental legislation of the past decade not been enacted and enforced.

However, general environmental effects on economy-wide employment are documented as being very limited. Obach notes that while broad economic improvement and the expansion of employment is diffused throughout society, the concrete beneficiaries of these employment-generating policies are commonly unorganized and remain unknown prior to their implementation. Not enough research is devoted to analyzing and specifying the outcomes these policies are likely to produce. In order to strengthen ties between workers and the environmental community, it is necessary to understand how *specific* employment sectors are likely to be affected by environmental regulations and concerns. It is certainly “not very reassuring to workers who have been laid off because of regulation-related plant closings to learn that thousands of others have found new opportunities manufacturing pollution control equipment.”

General union culture, ideology, organizational character, and focus should also be taken into account when devising coalition strategies and tactics. Another important consideration is the issue of a company’s competitiveness, since it is tied to workplace prospects—and consequently workers’ livelihoods, and has therefore regularly impacted union policies and practices.

Besides the threat of job losses, other economic interests like the prospects of job creation have provoked conflict between organized labor and the environmental community. To take an important current example, some unions have been refusing to contemplate cleaner, renewable non-nuclear energy options due to the promise of job creation, despite the fact that nuclear energy, apart from being

capital-intensive, is also among the least labor-intensive forms of energy creation. Labor-intensive alternative energy sources, especially solar power, are in the interest of both workers and the environment. One of the real causes of the increase in unemployment is “the substitution of energy and capital for human labor,” an issue that should serve as an incentive for organized labor and environmentalists to unite in support of labor-intensive, ecologically rational alternatives.

Investments in environmental improvements to existing facilities might help create and maintain jobs for workers, since companies may not want to abandon plants they have put substantial investment into. Environmental regulations and concerns might help preserve jobs in other ways as well. For instance, “research indicates that, historically, declines in timber industry employment were actually slowed by key environmental legislation, suggesting that rapid depletion of resources—not conservation—is more responsible for job loss in this sector.” Furthermore, greater environmental regulation tends to support public employee jobs in regulatory agencies. Similarly, a study initiated by the U.S. labor-environmental Blue/Green Working Group has established that a carbon tax would not only curtail U.S. release of CO<sub>2</sub> by 27 percent by 2010 and 50 percent by 2020, but it would also provide a significant boost to employment.

Combined with money recycled through reduced taxes on wages and growth in new energy technologies, the program could create 1.4 million jobs in 20 years, while substantially reducing reliance on imported oil. The jobs gained would mainly spring from economic growth made possible by savings in energy costs, which would more than offset the costs of the carbon tax and new technologies.

So far, however, the implementation of environmental policies seems to have disproportionately burdened the working class. For instance, measures such as taxing gasoline, the introduction of congestion charges, or an increase in the price of air travel all fall hardest on the poorer segments of society. The cost of pollution control should be passed on to the companies who create—and profit from—pollution, rather than consumers. Environmentalists and the labor movement should unite in strong campaigns demanding fuel-efficient, very cheap (or free) public transportation. Wenz summarizes some of the benefits to both the working public and the environment from efficient, clean, mass transit:

A train can carry as many people intercity as sixteen lanes of highway designed for automobiles, thereby saving land. It uses less power to transport people and produces less air pollution. It is eighteen times safer than a car. It contributes less to global warming. It requires less land use for parking at each end. ...[W]hen such public transportation is fully developed, it is convenient (because it departs and arrives frequently at many locations) and fast (compared to being stuck in rush hour traffic). Such efficiencies are reflected in studies showing that government expenditures on public transportation improve worker productivity and regional economic performance. ... The U.S. government currently subsidizes enormously the automotive and oil industries through tax breaks, road-building programs, health expenditures, and more.

That the burden of environmental policies falls most heavily on the backs of the working class has little resonance with many members of environmental organizations. Environmental groups might also be wary of compromising their main objectives for fear of losing members. Similarly, unions' central obligation is to economically protect their membership from redundancy and loss or decrease of salary. This is their main purpose and a precondition of their longer-term organizational survival. It is important to take these organizational constraints and values into account when trying to establish a relationship of mutual understanding and respect. Coalition-building is often a balancing act, in which openings for radicalization largely depend on the ability to appreciate the other side's concerns and dialectically transcend existing limitations and contradictions.

In this vein, the noted labor-environmental conflict in 1980s in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, with environmentalists keen on protecting the increasingly endangered old-growth forests on the one hand, and hostile and panicked loggers as the seeming “protagonists” on the other (although they were in reality used simply as pawns in the hands of the corporation), carries some instructive lessons for the

future.

The environmentalist responses to the increased cutting were, on the whole, insensitive and incomprehensible to workers and the local community. The direct action group Earth First!, which engaged in tactics such as blocking logging trucks, sabotaging logging equipment, and even the infamous tree-spiking, was particularly alienating and unconcerned about workers' problems and anxieties. Environmentalists mostly failed to support loggers in their bitter struggles against the timber companies throughout the 1980s. When they did arrive at the scene, environmentalists failed to explain that unrestricted, unsustainable logging cannot produce sustainable jobs. This opened the space for the company counter-offensive.

The industry made strategic use of this opportunity by holding anti-preservationist training sessions for workers during work hours at mills and by supporting worker actions against the environmental cause. There is even evidence to suggest that a policy proposal that would have protected spotted-owl habitat while limiting job loss was suppressed by the [George H.W.] Bush administration to perpetuate the labor-environmental division.

Judi Bari, a leading figure in Earth First! and a skillful organizer, recognized the main mistakes that were made, namely:

the utter lack of class consciousness by virtually all of the environmental groups. ... I have even had an international Earth First! spokesman tell me that there are no differences between the loggers and logging companies! ... As long as people on our side hold these views, it will be easy pickin's for the bosses to turn their employees against us.

While the distinction between environmentalist "value-centered" and labor "interest-centered" politics can be criticized as overly simplistic—and a combination of both is probably more often the case—significant differences in organizational style, approach, and membership expectations need to be recognized. Environmentalists are often members of the professional "middle class" ("white-collar workers") and represent "the needs and values of those who neither contribute to industrial production nor conform to its values and standards of rationality." However, this aspect of the labor-environmentalist conflict shouldn't be overestimated, since it has been shown that environmental concerns are quite widespread among the working class as well. As Norton points out: "the occupational and demographic profile of the labor movement is far too diverse to allow one to ascribe it a uniform 'class interest' or 'class outlook,' at least in respect to environmental issues." A Sierra Club survey in 2002 confirms this point. It found that 88 percent of United Auto Workers households were in favor of increasing automobile fuel-economy standards, while only 74 percent of the general population supported this measure.

Yet class and cultural boundaries between labor and most environmental organizations do exist, often hindering the establishment of cooperative relationships. As already mentioned, middle-class activists tend to organize their activities—in accordance with their materially and culturally privileged position—through a value-based logic, while working-class organizers tend to frame their approach "in the language and logic of interest." That is, they tend to judge policies according to their perceived economic interests. In contrast to "white-collar/middle-class" professionals, working-class consciousness has also been portrayed as less based on abstract reasoning and primarily formed around "concrete," tangible evidence and life experiences. This contributes to communication difficulties between these two groups. The degree of mutual trust between workers and environmentalists is negatively influenced by lack of regular, direct social interaction, their different backgrounds, experiences, and ways of understanding social events and issues.

For instance, manual workers (especially in extractive industries such as logging) might tend to consider nature as something solely for human use, quite apart from ideas of "enlightened stewardship" or nature's "intrinsic value." Slaughterhouse workers—usually some of the most exploited, least educated elements of the working class—are unlikely to understand calls to use their labor power in

order to stand up for animal rights and animal liberation. Fortunately, common or similar “cross-pollinating” interests, contexts, and experiences can also be (at least partially) constructed. This construction of shared experiences and common or complementary perceptions of interest, combined with a conscious effort at breaking the most divisive aspects of social reproduction (such as the division of labor into “intellectuals” and “manual workers”), is at the heart of more successful and more permanent coalition-building. Without this effort, workers might feel objectified, threatened, and degraded by environmentalists who are indifferent to their concerns.

### **Confronting Conflict**

In order to become more successful political actors, value-oriented environmentalists will also have to more strongly engage with and appeal to the interest-based logic not just of other movements like the labor movement, but of the wider public in general. A winning strategy must produce a synthesis of values and human interest. A reconciliation of these two perspectives is the only chance for reviving the notion of public good, which is so crippled today under the domination of neoliberal capitalism. As a point of principle, the ecological Left has to reject environmental strategies that burden the poor and the working class with the cost of environmental protection without compensation for their losses. The priority of this class-based approach entails a strong commitment to building progressive grassroots organizations independent of corporate, bureaucratic, and other elitist interests.

An important factor for determining the possibilities for cooperation is the programmatic scope of the actors in question. While trade unions, especially in Europe, assume a relatively broad stance and platform, environmental organizations, especially NGOs, typically limit their activities to much more specific issues. Environmental organizations with a broader agenda can more easily respond to other concerns and establish cooperative relations with other social movements and organizations, such as labor. The more socially oriented environmental organizations (for instance, the Citizens Environmental Coalition against toxics in the U.S.) can also quite easily reach out to different social actors and the general public.

In those rare cases where job loss is inevitable, both unions and environmentalists should demand a smooth and just employment transition (e.g., a state-financed retraining and assistance program), an economic safety net, and a dispersal of environmental protection costs. This is the best way to encourage workers’ support for environmental issues and foster the mutual respect needed for collaboration. It is this agenda for cooperation and mutual empowerment that a U.S. organizational bridge founded in 1975—Environmentalists for Full Employment—set to promote. This coalition, set up specifically in order to promote environmental aims in conjunction with preserving existing jobs and creating new ones, brought together labor and environmental activists and leaders for joint conferences and several united campaigns. OCAW’s “Superfund for Workers” proposal (which would ensure four years of support and vocational retraining for displaced workers), and the Blue/Green Working Group’s “Just Transition” proposal, which included demands for financial support, health care, and retraining to be funded by a tax on pollution, illustrate a constructive approach that is sensitive to workers’ needs and concerns.

Radical environmentalists in particular might feel unable to modify their demands, but a failure to compromise with labor will often result in the inability to achieve any positive change, or limit future possibilities through the build-up of mutual antagonisms. The struggle for environmental protection and conversion ultimately depends on the understanding and active support of working people, who constitute the majority of the population.

As I wrote in a previous article:

A dynamic understanding of people as workers and workers as activists is missing. For several decades now, there has occurred a shift of the concept of oppression from production relations (as the material basis for exploitation) to consumption, especially among many mainstream Greens who

would have us confined to our roles as consumers, where we are inherently relatively powerless and almost always disorganized. ... It is important to recognize the central importance of class and the revolutionary implications of class struggle at the point of production. People are in their materially most powerful role as producers of goods and services, capable of withholding labor, and also democratically taking over the means of production and distribution. ... Building the new society in the shell of the old entails changing who controls production, what is produced and how it is produced. This can be achieved only through democratizing the workplaces and empowering the communities.

Shantz further reminds us that “[t]he questions of ownership and control of the earth are nothing if not questions of class.” Judi Bari also summed this point up nicely:

A revolutionary ecology movement should also organize among poor and working people. For it is the working people who have their hands on the machinery. And only by stopping the machinery of destruction can we ever hope to stop this madness.

### **The Strengths of the Environmental Justice Movement**

Although relations between organized labor and environmental NGO’s, which are often restricted to lobbying, tend to be the dominant pattern of labor-environmental cooperation, environmental justice organizations represent a more horizontal, social movement-type approach that deserves more attention than it usually gets. The environmental justice movement is confronting the basic issues at the center of popular, pressing environmental concerns, such as “hazardous wastes, groundwater contamination, industrial pollution, and workplace safety, by drawing together labor unions, tenants associations, and civil rights and community groups.” In addition to their strong link with union health and safety and “right-to-know” concerns, these groups are helping to root environmental issues in communities themselves.

In contrast to many environmental groups (e.g., land-use organizations), which do not generally engage with other issues such as housing, welfare or health care, environmental justice organizations regularly cross inter-movement boundaries. The combination of their broader scope of interest and activity along with their “rooted struggle” approach helps to bring them closer to the organizational ethics and culture of the labor movement. In fact, they are commonly rooted in the most severely and directly affected working-class communities, which are also often communities of color. The “racialization” of environmental and socio-economic discrimination cannot be ignored by either labor or environmental movements. Howard Winant points out the ubiquity of this problem:

Pick any relevant sociological indicator—life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy, access to health care, income level—and apply it in virtually any setting, global, regional, or local, and the results will be the same: the worldwide correlation of wealth and wealth-being with white skin and European descent, and of poverty and immiseration with dark skin and “otherness.” [There is a]...planetary correlation of darkness and poverty.

This “totality” of deprivation and discrimination helps to generalize struggle beyond usual divisions and “areas of expertise.” The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice notes how responses to this situation have sometimes creatively played out in the racially divided southern United States:

[T]he environmental justice movement in the South has developed from the grassroots in myriad communities across the region and inherently incorporates all the other life-and-death issues its activists confront, including joblessness, abusive police practices, and the lack of health care, decent housing and equitable education. Thus, it bases itself on the new definition of the “environment” which includes all the life conditions where we live, work and play.

The effects of environmental racism and classism are under-narrated, as the underdogs are abandoned both by bureaucratic craft unionism and elitist mainstream environmentalism. There often seems to be some truth in Anthony Crosland’s branding of mainstream environmentalists as “middle-



class elitists who were indifferent to the needs of ordinary people, and who preferred to defend rural peace rather than do something about urban decay.”

This indifference contributes to the perpetuation of misery among non-Caucasians and the lower classes:

Neurological disease, reproductive disorders, and respiratory illnesses are frequently concentrated in communities with these environmentally hazardous facilities. Community activists, for instance, have documented a higher incidence of childhood leukemia, heart defects, and miscarriages in communities with a proximity to hazardous waste sites. Environmental and occupational health hazards are also responsible for increased incidence of cancer, asthma, and leukemia in low-income and working-class communities of color. ... Less than 10 percent of the chemicals in the workplace have been adequately tested for carcinogenicity.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has estimated at least 300,000 annual pesticide poisonings among farmworkers. Yet even this horrifying figure has been criticized as “unrealistically low.” Pena notes that in the U.S., farmworkers have a life expectancy of 49 years, and their rates of infectious and chronic diseases, malnutrition, and infant mortality greatly exceed national averages. These issues provide a natural link between environmental justice organizations and unions such as the United Farm Workers, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, whose members are particularly at risk for toxic exposures.

Environmental justice organizations, with their grassroots, rooted approach, offer a progressive antidote to the corporate bankrolled, anti-environmentalist groups, many of whom came into existence as part of the “Wise use” movement in the 1980s. Wise Use groups worked primarily in rural communities in the western U.S. Though such groups are deceptive about the corporate masters they serve, they have been able to successfully employ “libertarian,” anti-intellectual, anti-elitist themes that celebrate the individual as a way of appealing to hard-working farmers, loggers and miners—precisely those people the environmental movement needs to reach in order to advance its goals, particularly in the western U.S. The successful labor-community alliance against the Badische Anilin and Soda-Fabrik Corporation lockout of their Geismar, Louisiana plant in the 1980s nicely illustrates the potential of anti-corporate grassroots cooperation. In that case, workers and local citizens defeated the company’s campaign to decertify the union. Through a labor-community alliance, which included various environmentalist groups, they exposed the company’s ecologically harmful practices and were able to end the lockout on favorable terms for the workers. These are the types of strategies and movements most likely to succeed.

### **Social Movement Unionism and the Greening of the Labor Movement**

The increased co-optation of union officialdom and the rise of conservative business unionism (where the union essentially provides its passive members with services in exchange for dues) has resulted in the entrenchment of union hierarchies that are largely unresponsive towards its members, the wider potential of the labor movement, and the broader society. Union independence and a willingness to fight employers, as well as a broad and inclusive understanding of union functions within communities and society, are important prerequisites for stronger support for environmental protection by organized labor. They are also crucial for the development of a strong alliance between labor and the wider community. For instance, Obach notes that labor-environmental relations are most developed in New York and Wisconsin, where state AFL federations have a more social-union approach.

Health and safety issues have a particular advantage for combative unionists and those with a more rank-and-file approach, since they can also legitimize and legalize wildcat strikes, which provide additional tactical advantages (e.g., having an element of surprise, being harder to control, enabling covert sympathy strikes, etc.) and are a potent expression of workers’ militancy and self-organization.

Leading OCAW environmentalist, Tony Mazzocchi, stressed the pacifying effects of service-

style, bureaucratic union handling of health and safety issues, and of isolated legislative action. Indeed, Mazzocchi's union also had to establish its own oversight committees to deal with the shortcomings of the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act. Union locals are often more aware than the national union of local organizational needs and possibilities. In the same way that bureaucratic activity of the state has to be democratically kept in check from below, union bureaucracy also needs to be held accountable by rank-and-file organization and pressure. Moreover, as Staughton Lynd vividly described, community and environmental organizations that labor cooperates with are often quite undemocratic as well. Lack of internal democracy and rank-and-file passivity can threaten the legitimacy of coalitions and limit members' enthusiasm and willingness to fight for the issues at stake. Furthermore, a top-down union approach can present organizational and communication difficulties in cases where the environmental partner is committed to more horizontalist and consensus-based decision-making.

A bureaucratic approach sometimes contributes to a strategy of fragmented attempts at single-issue (or otherwise limited, e.g. sectoral) cooperation, stifling the development of a cohesive social movement. Gordon discussed the fragmented situation in which relatively efficient lines of communication existed between progressive leaders of unions such as the United Farm Workers, the United Steel Workers, the United Mine Workers, the International Association of Machinists, the United Auto Workers, and the OCAW and environmental leaders in the Sierra Club, Environmental Action, the National Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, and the Environmentalists For Full Employment, yet "too often the efforts of these well-intentioned leaders focused on legislative and political victories that proved hollow without widespread organizational support." Bureaucracy is often unresponsive to opportunities created for movement building by grassroots mobilization. As long as broad mobilizations only serve as transmission belts for organizational oligarchies, the potential for effectiveness and democratization will be stifled. As far as labor's role is concerned, a deepening of labor-environmental alliances and their transformation into a strong *movement* will directly depend on union structure, level of rank-and-file proactivity, and labor's organizational culture.

In some cases, unions can be very forward thinking and environmentally progressive, as the Lucas Aerospace alternative production plan put forward by the local union leader Mike Cooley and shop stewards, famously illustrated. They proposed a radical new plan that would save jobs threatened by layoffs by converting military production into production for civilian use. This included things like solar heating equipment, artificial kidneys, and systems for intermodal transportation.

The Australian "green bans" movement in particular, conducted by the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation (NSWBLF) during the 1970s, is a sparkling example of non-hierarchical, socially responsible—and even altruistic—democratic unionism. This is especially striking when compared with the traditional conservatism of the U.S. unions in the building trades. NSWBLF showed an uncommon willingness and ability to generalize social struggles in a radical framework. Often, following a meeting with ordinary residents of the affected local community, NSWBLF refused to work on projects that were environmentally or socially damaging. Thus it contested gentrification as well as environmental and even cultural destruction. Such green bans "expressed the union's determination to save open space or valued buildings and to ensure that people in any community had some say in what affected their lives." The union's internal workings and activities were based on rank-and-file democracy, limited tenure of union officials who had equal wages as workers, executive meetings open to all members, enthusiasm for combativeness, direct action, concern towards nature, and solidarity with homebuyers. It also organized job-site committees and promoted interest for workers' control of job sites. The workers even struck for the rights of women and homosexuals, and they used their power to support prisoners, Aborigines, students, migrants, the South African anti-apartheid movement, and other struggles. Their uncommon alliance with residents from "middle-class" suburbs over Kelly's Bush (the last remaining "undeveloped" bushland in the Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill) brought together "women of unimpeachable character with the rebels of the union movement," thus breaking old stereotypes and radicalizing middle-class residents. Aside from

preventing AU\$18 billion (in 2005 dollars) worth of development between 1971 and 1974, NSWBLF actions also educated the public and led to new regional and national environmental policies. Their environmental and socially responsible strikes and bold attempt at conversion from production-for-profit to construction-for-use was crushed when the bureaucratic federal union executive, led by the “Marxist-Leninist” union president Norm Gallagher, dismissed the militant New South Wales leadership from their posts. The NSWBLF radical leader, Jack Munday, observed: “[I]magine for a moment what struggles could be waged by the bigger unions with their greater resources, if they involved their membership as we did in direct confrontation with the wealthy employers.”

### **Dynamics, Theories, and Experiences of Labor-Green Coalition-building**

When possible, initiating cooperation on win-win issues is a good way to open dialogue and encourage organizational learning between the two movements, both in terms of new experiences and sharing knowledge and relevant information. Inter-organizational learning can also take the form of separate labor-environmental educational courses, such as those offered by the Labor Institute in New York City in affiliation with the former OCAW International Union, as well as those created by the New York Labor and Environment Network.

The next stage would be to institutionalize cooperation between labor and environmentalists. This can be done by setting up permanent structures, like the New York Labor and Environment Network and the Blue/Green Working Group, as well as by fostering internal organizational practices. As a matter of policy, unions could include environmental protection in collective bargaining and strike demands “on issues such as green travel plans, flexible working, procurement, resource use and alternative production.” In Britain, the environment has recently been integrated into the bargaining process through a campaign to introduce statutory rights for environmental representatives in unions. This demand is particularly important since it could set a new environmentalist union infrastructure and dynamic into motion. It would empower these union reps to take time off for training and give them the legal right to bargain on environmental issues. At the moment, union reps are overburdened, which limits their ability to engage with environmental issues.

The British labor movement is ramping up its efforts on environmental issues and its more environmentalist elements have recently started a campaign of “getting their house in order.” This campaign involves conducting education on ecological issues and adopting environmentally friendly policies such as socially responsible investment and ethical procurement, energy-efficiency at union buildings, recycling, and other green practices. These relatively small and sometimes symbolic changes might provide a potent encouragement to transcend hostile mindsets and deepen relationships.

Mutual trust is necessary for healthy and sustainable cooperation. It is built through a commonality or complementarity of interests, shared experiences, continuous mutual interaction, and so on. The role of organizational brokers or bridge-builders such as individual democratic “political entrepreneurs,” occupational health advocates, or progressive citizens’ groups is also extremely important in helping to bring diverse organizational actors to the table, helping movements learn about each other, transcending inter-organizational communication gaps, and developing more unified agendas. However, if individual bridge-builders fail to involve others from their group in their inter-organizational initiatives, they risk the prospect of suspicion, hostility, and being marginalized for stepping outside pre-approved and prescribed, regular organizational boundaries.

### **Electoral Alliances**

In addition to cooperating on health and safety, right-to-know, international trade, and similar issues, labor and the environmental movement can also often work together on electoral issues. This is made possible by their similar programmatic framework, and the shared interest in weakening and eventually defeating the deregulatory neoliberal forces, their common enemy. Moreover, “elected officials who are strongly pro-labor also tend to be strongly pro-environment.”

In the U.S., an important historical antecedent to such pro-labor and pro-environmental electoral alliances was the Progressive-era “Sewer Socialism” centered in Milwaukee. It was based around urban struggles for public health, better and healthier neighborhoods and workplaces, public sanitation systems, more parks, better and more accessible education, city-owned water and power systems, and the like. More recently, U.S. labor-community alliances built comparatively successful electoral coalitions such as LEAP and PRO-PAC in order to increase support for more progressive political candidates.

The so-called “New Social Movements,” which largely developed as a consequence of post-war affluence, broadened the fields of struggle and daringly placed non-material values onto the progressive agenda, bolstering the argument that socialist politics should not and cannot be limited to class issues. The recent nascent move towards ecosocialism represents an epochal new tendency and opportunity for the convergence of otherwise largely disconnected anti-corporate strategies, as well as for the advancement of democratic decentralist perspectives. Recent attempts at a radical red-green synthesis are exemplified and substantially represented by the newly formed Ecosocialist International Network.

It is also useful to glance at red-green electoral cooperation in developed European countries. The issue of red-green alliances is not strictly connected to the cooperation between organized labor and the environmental movement. This is a function of the extent to which the “umbilical cord” between labor and the socialist movement has been severed, disintegrating the once relatively compact social bloc which united the political and the economic wings of the struggle. Nonetheless, pro-worker political and economic forces and pro-environmental electoral and non-electoral organizations have retained some shared social goals and largely continue to share existing alternative organizational and communicational spaces (e.g., the daily newspaper *Morning Star* in England, participation of socialist groups in labor organizing, joint green party and environmental groups’ publications and campaigns, etc.). Such interconnections are not equally concentrated, numerous, direct, or active in all developed European countries, but they are universally present, sometimes in latent forms.

The most explicit and successful green-left electoral cooperation has been occurring in Nordic countries, where it is primarily represented by the Nordic Green Left Alliance and the Nordic Green Left, a subgroup of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left in the European parliament. This consists of organizations such as the Danish Red-Green Alliance (formed through a merger of three socialist parties), the red-green Danish Socialist People’s Party, the Swedish Left Party, the Norwegian Socialist Left Party, the Finnish ecosocialist Left Alliance, and the Left-Green Movement in Iceland. In these countries, these left-green formations have limited the growth of more centrist, “non-class” green parties, which have blossomed in many other parts of Europe.

An important part of this largely North European trend is the Dutch GroenLinks (Green Left), which was established through a merger of four left-wing parties in 1989, when they stood together in elections. The new formation doubled the seats its constituent parties had won in 1986. GroenLinks is a member of the more centrist European Green Party and the European Greens - the European Free Alliance group in the European parliament. The party’s parliamentary group supported the invasion of Afghanistan until internal party pressure forced it to change its position. In another significant instance—alone on the Left—the party campaigned for a critical “yes” vote to the draft European Constitution, indicating a more centrist attitude. It is currently shadowed by the significantly stronger Dutch Socialist Party, now the third strongest party in the country in electoral terms. The Socialist Party seems to have gained in popularity particularly by putting down roots in social movements and trade unions (despite its lack of a longer tradition of organized work within trade unions), and also by its populist anti-E.U., interest-based, economy-oriented approach. The Dutch Socialist Party’s success in breaking new ground with a militant approach among more conservative masses is confirmed by data which indicates that its 2006 voters previously largely “voted Labour or (to a lesser extent) Christian Democratic.” Meanwhile, for instance, 20 percent more women than men voted for GroenLinks, a

much wider margin than in the case of the Socialist Party. While the new “red-green” trend in certain developed European countries confirms the need and significant electoral potential of programmatic modernization, the contrast in the level of support, constituencies and support-base of the Dutch Green Left and the Socialist Party seems to indicate some limits of value-centered, “liberal-style” politics compared to certain electoral advantages of more traditional economy-centered, interest-based political approaches. On the other hand, the 2008 local elections in England confirm certain electoral advantages of the Green Party’s non-class vote, which was relatively high in various “middle-class” areas and generally good in the midst of a right-wing resurgence and weak results among explicitly socialist contenders.

Red-green cooperation transcends both the eco-centric denial of class realities and a vulgar class framework. On the one hand, it prevents the narrow productivist trap into which traditional socialists had all too often fallen, isolating themselves from other progressive forces; at the same time it blocks the degeneration of environmentalism into a “new-age,” classless, “neither right nor left” ideology which has, in conjunction with political opportunism, destroyed the anti-capitalist prospects of many green movements and parties thus far (with the German Green Party being the most infamous example of this trend). In Britain, largely due to the electoral law which prohibits joint slates, the left-wing Green Party and the socialist parliamentary Respect party have been unable to develop meaningful cooperative relationships. The explicitly eco-socialist network Socialist Resistance within Respect and the Green Left faction within the Green Party might function as significant organizational bridge-builders in the future, initially at least so that the two parties can start forming electoral non-aggression pacts.

A huge task of the socialist movement is to discover successful ways of combining a set of specific, sectoral political lines (both ideological and policy-type) and modes of operation. The Left can revive itself only if it accepts the present reality of class and cultural fragmentation and develops sophisticated, differentiated approaches to begin transcending these rifts. A promising perspective lies not in an incoherent hodgepodge, but in a convincingly pluralist yet cohesive alliance. This problem is not solely posed by actual conditions of interclass differences, since there is also a plurality of identities within the working class and among working-class individuals. Moreover, there has been a relative decline of class as an immediate reference point of popular identity, and especially of workers’ class consciousness as understood in terms of class allegiance, the capacity to grasp one’s class role in society, and the capacity to act in one’s own rational class interests.

While a class “dealignment” strategy would be grossly inadequate for the genuine Left, growing differentiation in class composition and life experiences, varying cultural backgrounds and organizational focuses, as well as the decline in the power of the labor movement to affect change alone require a diversification of socialist strategic approaches that must be sensitive to specific constituencies and capable of interweaving and uniting struggles around a common underlying agenda for systemic change.

## **Conclusion**

Progressive movements should adopt a more inclusive agenda capable of reconnecting anthropocentric and eco-centric perspectives. The battle for the hearts and minds of the public—including, of course, working people and their communities—is indispensable for the development of a truly successful environmentalist movement. This also implies the need to frame environmental policies in terms of working people’s understandable self-interest, especially as a transitional link to a new ecological sensibility. Consciousness is more likely to be altered in stages than all at once, and compromise and more instrumental cooperation are likely to precede more radical forms of joint work. Yet, these deeper, more radical, and more enlightened forms of cooperation will also depend on the development of a more grassroots, environmental justice type of environmentalism, and the strengthening of a democratic, social movement unionism.

Enlightened unions, rank-and-file labor networks, union members, and officials should engage with the environmental movement and simultaneously challenge co-opted labor officials, as well as regressive and pro-business positions among workers. The structurally fundamental role of the labor movement as an organized expression of popular interests and a force partially capable of challenging the capitalist logic implies a huge responsibility to the environment and the general public.

As Chris Baugh, assistant general secretary of the British Public and Commercial Services Union, stated: “Don’t blame individuals, this is about the economic system and the power that people have to exercise control over the methods of production.” A *deep* labor-environmental alliance might only unfold in conjunction with the demand for a democratic workplace and community control of economic decisions. Ultimately, only participatory democratic structural change will enable a genuine conversion to a just and sustainable economy.