

US LABOR COMBATING ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES: *ORGANIZING OPPORTUNITIES LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ❖ Introduction, Page 2
- ❖ Literature Review, Page 6
- ❖ Findings, Analysis, and Discussions
 - 1948 to 1972 - The forgotten history of US labor and the environment, Page 14
 - 1973 to 1990s - The fall of labor/environmental coalitions, Page 19
 - 1990s to the Present - The rise of labor/environmental justice coalitions, Page 27
 - ✓ The fightback against free trade and preparing the battle ground at Seattle, Page 29
 - ✓ The Battle of Seattle, Page 31
 - ✓ Successes and Setbacks, Page 33
- ❖ Conclusion, Page 39
- ❖ Bibliography, Page 43



INTRODUCTION:

This thesis places the question of labor organizing in coalition with the environmental justice movement in historical context. I will compare labor's activities on environmental issues in three time periods: 1948 to 1972, 1973 to the 1990s, and the 1990s to the present. The labor movement took the lead on many environmental concerns in the first period, because of the space labor occupied and the resources it mustered. Labor led the charge on such environmental concerns because the environmental justice movement was far smaller and did not

command the level of resources labor possessed. With the relative economic prosperity of this time period U.S. labor was able to be inclusive of broader social justice issues such as the environment.

After 1973, in the second period, facing massive job losses, labor shifted its priorities away from broader social concerns like the environment and began to take a more concessionary posture in collective bargaining. Economic pressures made union and non-union members alike feel vulnerable, and corporate America seized the opportunity. In the third period, from the 1990s to the present, although the discourse of labor versus environment was still prevalent, labor and environmental coalitions (also known as blue/green coalitions) created an environmental justice framework that is helping both movements to overcome the class divide that traditionally divided them. Labor and environmental coalitions are placing the question of securing the necessities of life at the heart of environmental action.¹ This comparative historical analysis will expose the conditions under which blue/green coalitions emerge. My argument is that coalition building is affected by economic and political conditions, but these same economic/political conditions and impositions can be trumped over time by education and lessons learned from the past. This is indisputable when we examine the mass mobilizations of the 1990s such as the Battle of Seattle, Occupy Wall Street, and the present day Blue/Green Alliance.

Coalition building between the labor and environmental movements may seem elusive, but will prove imperative if global capital continues to maintain its current trajectory, a course that will only lead to even greater environmental degradation, in turn, further exacerbating global economic conditions. The trade union principles of justice and dignity are not in conflict with the principles of social movement environmentalism. In unity, these social forces are in a stronger position combating the impositions of global capital than either of them can do alone. Coalition building between the labor and environmental movements has been extensively researched over the years and discussed by academics and trade unionists alike. **Regardless of whether one favors an organizing model or a servicing/business unionism model, organized labor must address the heated debate surrounding the question of “jobs versus the environment”.**

Labor’s potential for growth, and its relevance as a social force are enhanced, particularly among youth and for communities in need, when it takes up environmental issues. When labor does not take the steps necessary to be inclusive of broader social concerns these same communities are unlikely to view labor unions as a vehicle for improving their living and social conditions. For these reasons many labor activists embrace a social environmental perspective rather than following global capital’s market-based green economy and the business environmental

¹ Mayer, Brian – *Blue-Green Coalitions: Fighting for Safe Workplaces and Healthy Communities*; Cornell University Press, 2009, P.48

agenda.² The labor movement is beginning to gain a serious understanding of truths outside its familiar terrain, such as those from science, and actively engage in the fight against global warming.³

Though the labor movement is far from being crowned the “steward of the planet” or “protector of the environment,” in recent years many unionists have become more receptive to the question of the environment. A good example of labor moving outside its comfort zone was the labor movement’s public support for a socially responsible environmental policy in the 1999 “Battle of Seattle.” A more recent example is the work of the Blue/Green Alliance, a coalition of labor and environmental organizations representing over 15 million workers and supporters, with unions such as the United Steel Workers playing a leadership role. Not only U.S. unions but also labor organizations around the world, in both the global north and the global south, are engaging in such coalitions. While advancing trade union rights for collective bargaining, freedom of association and organizing, they are also increasingly working in coalition with environmentalists to address our responsibility to the global environment. With the U.S. labor movement beginning to play a larger role on the question of global warming, “green jobs” are becoming an agenda item for creating jobs in renewable energy, making buildings and industry more energy-efficient, as well as jobs that reduce our carbon footprint and greenhouse gas emissions.⁴

This potentially leads to a growing openness towards coalition building with the environmental justice movement among rank-and-file workers. Connecting workplace hazards with pervasive environmental hazards that leach into the community, unions and community groups can pressure politicians to embrace labor/environmental concerns. To move beyond the corporate perspective that pits jobs against the environment, workers and environmentalists can find common ground around a political ecology that drives change and does not simply respond to it.⁵ Despite the positive efforts of blue/green coalitions, the U.S. labor movement still has a long way to go with adopting a climate change policy, unlike many global labor confederations and national unions of other nations.

At a UN investor summit on climate risk, on January 12, 2012, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka was forthright in his statement about climate threat.

Scientists tell us we are headed ever more swiftly toward irreversible climate change with catastrophic consequences for human civilization. And far from being a threat only in a distant future, climate change is happening now. That demands action! The carbon emissions from coal, from oil and natural gas, agriculture, and so many other human activities have caused global warming, and we have to act to cut those emissions, and act now.⁶

² Dimitris Stevis, *Unions and the Environment: Pathways to Global Labor Environmentalism. Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, 2011, P. 145

³ Sean Sweeney, More than Green Jobs: Time for a New Climate Policy for Labor. New Labor Forum, Fall 2009, P.53

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Sean Sweeney, More than Green Jobs: Time for a New Climate Policy for Labor. New Labor Forum, Fall 2009, P.54

⁶ <http://www.labor4sustainability.org/articles/1695/>, Jeremy Brecher and Brendan Smith, Labor and Environment: Next Steps for Dialogue, Publisher: Labor Network for Sustainability (April 30, 2014)

While the AFL-CIO has gradually accepted the reality of man-made global warming, this call to action represents full recognition of this global problem. Despite such public statements, however, the AFL-CIO still has not endorsed even the minimal targets for carbon reduction proposed by the world's leading body of climate scientists, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), let alone the reduction of carbon in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million that America's leading climate scientist, James Hansen, says is necessary to prevent the "catastrophic consequences for human civilization that is looming on the horizon."⁷ The U.S. labor movement adopting a science-based climate change policy and divorcing itself from global capital's "green economy" is yet to be fully realized. But a science-based climate change policy can become a reality if the labor movement joins in coalition with the environmental justice movement – locally and globally.

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⁷ *Ibid*

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