



Can Workers and Environmentalists Learn to Cooperate?

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Driving across western Pennsylvania not long ago, I was struck by yard signs decrying President Obama's "War on Coal." The same message blares from billboards and signs throughout coal country. Appalachian coal-mining regions have swung hard to the right in recent years, boosting the GOP in many states. Not long ago, West Virginia was reliably Democratic, but in 2012 Mitt Romney carried the state with 62% of the vote.

Republicans seek to stoke and benefit from anger about disruptive economic shifts in coal country. Industry leaders blame the Obama administration for new Environmental Protection Agency rules limiting greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, many of which have traditionally burned coal. Environmentalists and the Democratic Party are accused of trying to destroy coal mining, the staple industry of the region for more than a century.

Even unionized miners have joined the accusatory chorus. The United Mine Workers refused to endorse either presidential candidate in 2012. On a West Virginia radio program union president Cecil Roberts castigated the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, declaring that the "Navy SEALs shot Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan and Lisa Jackson shot us in Washington."

Although new regulations do make coal-burning power plants harder to build, coal is declining for many reasons. Natural gas prices have plummeted, and many power plants are refitting their boilers to burn this cheaper alternative fuel. Intensive exploitation of coal for over a century means that many seams have little left to mine, even using methods like mountaintop removal. Coal companies have shifted investments out of Appalachia into Wyoming's Powder River Basin, where they can mine huge coal deposits with largely nonunion labor. Mechanization has reduced employment numbers over the last thirty years, even as production has increased.

Must Job Losses Pit Workers against Greens?

My research focuses on timber unions and environmental issues in the Pacific Northwest, and the current anger of mine workers against environmentalists reminds me of northwestern tensions during the 1980s and 1990s. Like Appalachian miners today, northwestern loggers back then sided with mill owners on environmental issues because they saw no other way to protect their jobs. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, production of wood skyrocketed, while jobs plummeted. Members and the two major timber worker unions suffered at the hands of corporations seeking to crush union power by eliminating jobs. Timber corporations began shipping logs to Japan for processing rather than rely on unionized mills to cut logs to make U.S. products to sell abroad. Rather than replenish timber resources with aggressive reforestation, companies began investing in tree farms in the U.S. South, British Columbia, New Zealand, and other regions around the world. Some companies even shipped logs to mills built just over the U.S. border in Mexico, only to re-import the processed wood back to the United States for sale.

With profits soaring for timber companies, northwestern forests were destroyed. By 1975 old-growth forests with the most profitable trees had declined precipitously, and biologists discovered existential threats to spotted owls reliant on old-growth timber. Environmental groups used scientific data to file suits that forced the U.S. Forest Service to protect owl habitats in compliance with the Endangered Species Act and National Forest Management Act.

Few logging jobs were actually lost due to efforts to protect owls, because by the 1980s few loggers cut old-growth timber on federal lands. But environmentalists were convenient scapegoats to distract attention from the exports, technological changes, and business strategies that actually caused most job losses. Timber interests convened rallies, and pickup trucks started sporting bumper stickers calling on northwesterners to "Save a Logger, Eat an Owl."

Environmentalist Shortcomings

In the Northwest a couple of decades ago as in Appalachia now, environmentalists have often not been able or willing to counter their own demonization and reach out to threatened workers.

- In Appalachia today, environmentalists are not much of a presence. Some local activists have fought mountaintop removal but, overall, environmentalists have not tried to create strong local connections. Their enemies tag them as “outsiders” who do not care about the native economy.
- In the Northwest during the 1980s, the accusations were slightly different. Environmentalists were clustered in Seattle, Portland, Eugene, and other regional cities, allowing many cultural tensions between urban and rural dwellers to come into play. What is more, radical environmental groups like EarthFirst! actively alienated workers through extremist tactics such as tree spiking. In point of fact, many environmentalists displayed open indifference to the economic plight of loggers, giving the companies a clear opening to mobilize worker anxieties against seemly alien and uncaring advocates.

The Need for Bridge-Building

Today's environmentalists have learned lessons from the spotted owl campaigns, yet they still have few answers for workers worried that green regulations will cost them their jobs. Greens must become more proactive in building alliances and looking for solutions that create jobs along with protections against environmental disasters – which, after all, wreak the greatest harm on the health and living situations of those least economically able to shield themselves.

Like the northwestern loggers some time ago, Appalachian mineworkers and their unions are siding with their bosses because they are scared about unemployment. But they should recognize that allying with corporations against environmentalists did not pay off for northwestern loggers. In 1978, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters joined with the timber industry to oppose the expansion of Redwood National Park. Just one year later, northwest California's largest timber company betrayed workers by engaging in a successful union-busting campaign.

In Appalachia, Mine Worker unionists and greens must build alliances. The unions necessarily fight for jobs, but attacking the Environmental Protection Agency and demonizing greens will not restore the mines. To build a better future, progressive forces must learn to work together.