



How Unions and Environmentalists Can Work Together

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For more than three years, a smoldering underground fire has been burning beneath the Bridgeton Landfill in suburban St. Louis. Community members worry about the toxic gasses and fear that the fire could spread to the adjacent West Lake Landfill – a Superfund site where nuclear waste was dumped decades ago. Although the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the fire is 900 feet away from the nuclear waste, and the landfill operator insists there is little threat, in 2014, environmentalists and unions came together to demand improved safety measures. The Missouri Coalition for the Environment, the Teamsters Union, and Missouri Jobs with Justice convened an informational meeting, enlisted experts, and lobbied government officials to mitigate the risks posed by the fire.

The West Lake effort is only one recent instance of joint efforts by unions and environmentalists. The New Jersey Work Environment Council created in 1986 is one of the most durable such alliances, and at the national level the BlueGreen Alliance includes unions such as the United Steelworkers, the United Autoworkers, the Service Employees International Union, along with environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the National Wildlife Federation. This alliance pushes for the creation of high-quality green jobs in projects fostering renewable energy, efficient transportation, safe water infrastructure, and environmentally friendly manufacturing enterprises and green buildings.

Why Collaboration Makes Sense

Partnerships between unions and environmental groups help each side deploy strengths and make up for weaknesses.

- The erosion of manufacturing has decimated membership in steel, coal, autos, and other industries that were at the core of a powerful labor movement in the 1950s. Today, fewer than seven percent of private sector workers are enrolled in unions, which retain wide memberships only in delimited sectors such as construction and some areas of public employment. Unions struggle to reverse membership declines and rebuild clout.
- Popular support for environmentalism is wide but not deep. In early 2014, Gallup reported that eighteen percent of Americans claimed to be active in the environmental movement, with another forty-two percent calling themselves sympathetic (and only ten percent not sympathetic). Nearly half thought that the government was doing too little to protect the environment. But other priorities such as jobs are much more urgent for most Americans, and only about one in twenty report belonging to an environmental group, fewer than the proportion enrolled in unions.

Effective collaborations can broaden support for union goals and deepen backing for environmental agendas. As dangers from unhealthy workplaces demonstrate, both unionists and environmentalists grapple with the side-effects of unbridled markets. That is why partnerships often emerge naturally, as happened in the Bridgeton landfill cleanup effort.

Obstacles to Collaboration

But serious problems and clashing incentives can undermine attempts at cooperation by unions and environmental groups. Union members want their leaders to protect material benefits, such as good jobs, pay, benefits, and working conditions. But members of environmental groups expect few if any material benefits for themselves. Instead, they join because they share the purposes of the group or enjoy contact with others who are like-minded. These differences in member motivation and incentives for organizational leaders can spark conflicts, especially when crusades to stop environmental damage seem to threaten the jobs and livelihoods of unionized miners, loggers, and workers in power plants, factories and chemical facilities.

In the Pacific Northwest, for example, environmentalist efforts to limit logging in old growth forests and

protect the endangered spotted owl created an angry backlash among lumber workers. In another instance, the Laborers Union and the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union have bitterly denounced environmental opposition to building the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline. Rhetoric can fly in such clashes, with union members caricaturing environmentalists as upper-middle class dilettantes who champion nature over people's jobs and income, and environmentalists stereotyping union members as self-centered and indifferent to the environment.

Overcoming the Obstacles to Build Effective Partnerships

Experience and research reveal three steps to soften conflicts and enable mutually beneficial collaborations between trade unionists and environmentalists.

First, all parties need to take the time to hear and sincerely grasp one another's concerns and standpoints. Environmentalists must understand that jobs are morally and materially central for union members, and grasp union concerns about employer exploitation. Trade unionists, in turn, must understand the values of environmentalists.

Secondly, collaboration requires credible leaders who can bridge standpoints and facilitate joint activities, leaders such as Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemicals, and Atomic Workers International Union. Inspired by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, Mazzocchi built coalitions of scientists, health professionals, environmentalists and unions to bring about laws protecting occupational safety and health. Civically engaged scholars can play similar bridging roles.

Finally, unions and environmentalists must develop shared, inclusive frameworks focused on overlapping aspirations. The United Nations has broadened the idea of "sustainable development" to include a call for "life with dignity for all." Leaders and members from both organizational worlds in the United States can agree that this requires safe high-wage jobs as well as environmental improvements. As earlier BlueGreen efforts have shown, with imagination and vision, trade unions and environmental groups can tackle challenges together to move America and the world toward a future of sustainable communities filled with quality jobs.

Read more in David Brian Robertson, *Capitol, Labor, and State: The Battle for American Labor Markets from the Civil War to the New Deal* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).