



Jobs and the Environment: Having the cake and eating it

Dispelling the myths about the false choices between employment and saving the environment

When many people think about the 'environment' they often think of things outside their day-to-day lives; forests, oceans, endangered species, river systems. The environment has long been seen as something 'out there', beyond our lives, and, as such, is often seen as an 'add on' issue for many trade unionists and working people. 'Environmentalism' has been, overwhelmingly (in countries like Australia) a pre-occupation of the middle classes. The mainstream media, governments, business all tend to see environmental issues equally in a non-political way. While this has been shifting since the early 1970s, there still remains a fundamental chasm between the day to day 'business' of the environment movement and those concerned about workers' and wider social rights.

It can be argued that the days of the Green Bans, of Environmentalists for Full Environment and attempts to achieve a conservator (steady state) economy were high points in the creation of an environmentalism that addressed equally the needs of people and the natural environment. This occurred in the early to mid 1970s. The basic premise of this emergent movement, which was class conscious and 'political', was that working people and environmentalists had common cause and would be stronger through identifying common enemies than in becoming trapped in oppositional politics. Dave Kerin, a long term trade union activist, argues that from the mid seventies employers saw an opportunity to divide workers from greens, and so began an internal conflict within the workers' movement which presented the problem as 'jobs versus environment'. It can also be argued that much of the green movement went on a political trajectory in the 1980s and early 90s that saw ever diminishing collaboration with unions and a consciously apolitical approach to activism. The result of this was that the conflict between workers in the resource sector and environmentalists became the 'icon' image of environmentalism in these decades.

Sadly, the decades of the 1980s and 90s saw an ever greater divergence of the mainstreams of both these movements. There were certainly exceptions to the rule, for instance, heartening collaboration between environmental activists and trade unions on issues including globalisation, common campaigning against specific companies (for instance against Rio Tinto), and the Earthworker initiative in Victoria and other ventures. It is worth considering Earthworker in some detail as it represents the most recent formal attempt in Australia to develop links between the two movements. Earthworker was an initiative of the Electrical Trades Union, Friends of the Earth and the Rail, Tram, Bus Industry Union and others. It arose out of discussions around the issue of union-green relations, the history of where we got those relations right, and an analysis of the points at which those relations broke down. Time was allowed for discussion around the 'jobs versus environment' debate and a range of other issues affecting relations between the two social movements. According to Dave Kerin, 'out of this atmosphere (of debate) a new way of working is developing which relies upon the best traditions of the labor movement - solidarity, mutual aid and cooperation - combined with the best traditions of the green movement, interconnection, inclusivity and openness.

One of the first positions reached, which was really the underlying philosophy of Earthworker, was that a false dichotomy had been deliberately created between workers/unionists and greens. In establishing Earthworker the obvious was accepted, that the vast majority of active greens were unionists and/or supporters of unionism. Likewise the vast majority of unionists had a concern for environmental protection and sustainability'.

Earthworker came to an untimely end in 2001 after it was asked to mediate in a conflict between activists seeking to protect native forests from logging in the Otway ranges and the Forestry Division of the CFMEU.

Some benchmarks in environment-trade union collaboration and conflict

- the 'green bans' of the early 1970s. See 'Green Bans, Red Union: environmental activism and the NSW BLF' by Meredith and Verity Burgmann.
- socially engaged environmentalism, for instance the green organisation Environmentalists for Full Employment (mid 1970s)
- Australian Council of Trade Unions policy to ban uranium mining and export from 1979-84

- increased separation between the two movements with ever greater focus on logging/ forestry and icon areas as a key pre-occupation of the green movement – Franklin, Daintree, Wet Tropics, southern forests, etc (early and mid 1980s to mid 1990s)
- the formalisation of links between the green movement and organised labor (eg, in 1993, the ACTU and ACF launched a green jobs program)
- re-emergence of class conscious environmentalism (through influence of environmental justice philosophy and practical collaboration over toxics, community struggles during Kennett era in Vic, etc) (early 1990s)
- increased alliance building between greens and trade unions (and other social sectors) from the mid 1990s – Jabiluka, 1998; MUA dispute, WEF protests, 2000)

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The political basis of collaboration between socially engaged environmentalists and trade unions could be environmental justice.

Environmental justice can be defined as the pursuit of equal justice and equal protection under the law for all, without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender and /or socioeconomic status. This concept includes meaningful community participation in actions of private industry decision-makers and governments at all levels.

Environmental justice is concerned, in a broad sense, with the processes through which inequalities arise from social, political and environmental decision making, actions and policies. On the local, regional, national, and international levels, environmental justice is interested in the mechanisms that give rise to class, gender and racial inequalities in a range of actions and practices.

These include, but are not limited to: the increased likelihood of being exposed to environmental hazards; negative impacts of environmental processes and policies; poverty; public health; worker rights and occupational safety; the segregation of jobs, housing, communities, facilities, and public conveyances; unequal access to or inadequate maintenance of environmental amenities like parks and playgrounds; inequality in the delivery of environmental services like garbage removal and transportation; the appropriation of land, destruction of indigenous cultures, and the abrogation of traditional treaty rights; and the expulsion or removal of people from particular territories.

Environmental justice is also concerned with the preservation of land, and the environmental practices and cultures of marginalised peoples; developing sustainable communities; providing multi-cultural environmental education; safeguarding human rights; and shaping new environmental discourses, ethics, policies, and plans for the twenty-first century.

Source: New York University Centre for Environmental & Land Use Law data base.

The unifying insight of environmental justice recognises that neither the costs of pollution nor the benefits of environmental protection are evenly distributed throughout our society. Uneven distributions of 'socially acceptable' environmental hazards and their long-term corrosion of health and life quality stem from inequalities of socioeconomic and political power. Such inequalities underlie a broad range of environmental problems from overpopulation, resource depletion, environmental degradation, and degree of direct exposure to hazardous materials. Those who live or work in close proximity to the source, storage destination, or waste stream of environmental contaminants bear most of the burden and risks associated with their production. By contrast, the economic benefits of industrial production are concentrated among wealthier groups whose communities are insulated by distance from direct daily exposure. Questions of who pays and who benefits from contemporary policies of economic growth, industrial development and environmental protection are at the heart of the environmental justice agenda.

Across the nation, low-income people, regardless of race, and people of colour, regardless of economic status, are more likely to suffer poor health and quality of life due to environmental degradation. Numerous studies have found that those who live in close proximity to noxious facilities are disproportionately people of colour or of low income, and race has been found to be stronger indicator of the two. In economically distressed communities promises of new jobs associated with the siting of hazardous facilities or threats of job loss associated with their closing are not easily dismissed. Many residents reluctantly accept long-term health risks in exchange for the prospect of short-term economic benefit. Many who would leave cannot. Low-income families cannot afford to "vote with their feet" and move away from a high risk place of residence. Mobility options of even middle-class people of colour are still constrained by racial segregation in housing. No one prefers to work in or live and raise children downstream from hazardous facilities, through out of necessity many do.

Source: B R Taylor (ed) (1995); Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism. SUNY Press.

'Double dividend' - areas for collaboration in the campaign against greenhouse

Public transport funding - "Green policies to promote public transport, cycling and walking could lead to the creation of 130,000 new jobs by 2010, which would more than offset the loss of around 43,000 jobs in the motor industry as a result of decreasing car use. Furthermore, if measures were taken to encourage the

use of cleaner, more efficient vehicles and leasing rather than car ownership, another 35,000 jobs could be created.” http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/less_traffic_more_jobs.pdf

Renewable energy sector development – Environmentally, the transition to co-generation, solar hot water, photovoltaic cells, wind, low-impact hydro and geothermal sources of energy is necessary, and at the same time the source of many jobs. A coalition of environmental groups in NSW have claimed that investments in renewable energy instead of new coal-fired power plants “promise clean energy and jobs growth well in excess of the jobs found in the fossil fuel electricity generation industry”, including significant increases in jobs in rural areas. <http://www.acfonline.org.au/docs/general/00955.pdf>. Friends of the Earth UK are also researching the benefits of renewable energy for job creation:

“According to the 1996 European Commission’s Green Paper on renewable energies (which calls for a doubling of the contribution from renewable energies in the EU by 2010 to 12%), the development of renewables can bring positive and tangible effects on regional development and employment. It can bring employment to regions, which are otherwise deprived of industrial development, as well as a supply of energy resources necessary for development.

Realising half the EU’s renewable technical potential by 2020 (14% of primary energy demand) could create 515,000 jobs (net, allowing for losses in other energy sectors) and reduce CO2 emissions by 16.2%. 160,000 new jobs could be created in the rural areas of the EU if 5% of energy was produced from biomass.” http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/double_dividend.html

Energy efficiency: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has identified cost and energy effective measures which have good job creation potential, opening up jobs in manufacture, delivery, installation and advice provision. A study for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions found that the adoption of energy conservation best available technologies could create 500,000 extra jobs in the EU.

- “The net employment gains of \$3.1 billion of investments in US DSM (demand side management) programmes has been estimated at over 75,000 jobs, while simultaneously saving 50 TWh. (Krier and Goodman, 1992)
- A DSM pilot study under the EU SAVE programme for the Hannover local utility company in Germany suggested that 1850 jobs could be created for an investment of 1745 million DM, achieving a CO2 reduction of 27% between 1990 and 2010. (Stadtwerke Hannover, 1995)
- Taking the average job creation potential of 7 DSM studies, it has been suggested that every £20 million DSM investment could create 100- 115 net jobs plus another 70 to 80 indirect jobs.” (Ecotec, 1997) http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/double_dividend.html

Carbon tax on industry and ecological tax reform – carbon taxes on industry and commerce is seen as a way of reducing the amount of fossil fuel based energy consumption. Friends of the Earth UK argues that it can generate huge revenues and the economic cost of such a tax can be offset by a concurrent reduction in labour taxes, which form a package of ‘ecological tax reform’.

“One study by UK researchers found that employment growth of around 3% for G7 countries for a carbon tax of \$275 per tonne, resulting in a 31% drop of CO2 emissions by 2035 (Mabey, N., *et al* 1997). While there were initial GDP reductions (up to 1.5%), for most G7 countries there were GDP increases post 2000. Another study by Belgian government economists suggests the creation of 700,000 new jobs in the EU’s 6 largest member states through the original EU carbon/energy tax (\$10/bbl of oil) proposal (Bossier, F. and Bréchet, T., 1995).” http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/double_dividend.html

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The Houston Principles (USA) – a positive example

Preamble

On May 19, 1999, environmental and labor leaders confronted CEO Charles Hurwitz in Houston to demand that his Maxxam Corporation, which owns Kaiser Aluminum and Pacific Lumber Company, be held accountable for its impact on working people, communities and the environment.

By clear-cutting ancient redwoods in Northern California, and by locking-out striking steelworkers in five cities, the Maxxam corporation has become an icon of corporate irresponsibility.

Recognising that we have a common interest in making corporations more accountable for their behaviour world-wide, environmental and labor leaders have formed the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment and circulated the following statement, dubbed the "Houston Principles".

Whereas:

- The spectacular accumulation of wealth by corporations in America's most affluent during the past two decades has come with a huge price tag.
- Corporations have become more powerful than the government entities designed to regulate them.
- The goal of a giant, global corporation is to maximise wealth and to wield political power on its own behalf.
- Too often, corporate leaders regard working people, communities, and the natural world as resources to be used and thrown away.
- Recognising the tremendous stakes, labor unions and environmental advocates are beginning to recognise our common ground. Together we can challenge illegitimate corporate authority over our country's and communities' governing decisions.
- While we may not agree on everything, we are determined to accelerate our efforts to make alliances as often as possible.

We believe that:

- A healthy future for the economy and the environment requires a dynamic alliance between labor, management, and environmental advocates.
- The same forces that threaten economic and biological sustainability undermine the democratic process.
- The drive for short-term profits without regard for long-term sustainability hurts working people, communities, and the earth.
- Labor, environmental and community groups need to take action to organise as a counter-balance to abusive corporate power.

Environmental and labor advocates who have signed these principles resolve to work together to:

- Remind the public that the original purpose behind the creation of corporations was to serve the public interest - namely working people, communities, and the earth.
- Seek stricter enforcement of labor laws and advocate for new laws to guarantee working people their right to form unions and their right to bargain collectively.
- Make workplaces, communities and the planet safer by reducing waste and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Demand that global trade agreements include enforceable labor and environmental standards.
- Promote forward-thinking business models that allow for sustainability over the long term while protecting working people, communities, and the environment.

This ground-breaking alliance of labor and environmentalists invites all people to join with us in a spirit of creative cooperation. Together, we can forge a partnership that protects people and the planet.

<http://www.asje.org/houston.html>

References for further reading

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Burgmann M. and V. *Green Bans, Red Union*, UNSW Press
Friends of the Earth Melbourne (2000); *Environmental Justice: community campaigning*. Melbourne.
Strangio, P. *No Toxic Dump! A triumph for grassroots democracy and environmental justice*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2001
The Working Group on Environmental Justice bibliography site: <http://ecojustice.net/bib/>

Some organisational contacts

EcoEquity (USA) <http://www.ecoequity.org/>
The Environmental Justice and Climate Change (USA) <http://www.ejcc.org/index.html>
The Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment <http://www.asje.org/>
The Just Transition Alliance (USA) <http://www.jtalliance.org/>
Friends of the Earth Australia <http://www.foe.org.au/>

This briefing paper was written by Cam Walker, Friends of the Earth Australia, for the conference: **Advance Australia Fair – Building sustainability, justice and peace, 30-31 July 2005, Melbourne Trades Hall.** For more information about the conference, how to register, this particular workshop and the Now We The People network, please visit www.nowwethepeople.org. Email info@nowwethepeople.org
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