

## CHAPTER 1

### *Mending the breach between labour and nature:*

#### *A case for Environmental Labour Studies<sup>1</sup>*

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#### *Conflicts between environmentalists and labour: nature as labour's 'Other'*

Over the past forty years the relationship between environmentalists on the one hand and labour on the other has largely vacillated between distrust and suspicion at best through to rancour and open hostility at worse. Environmental movements have accused trade unions of defending jobs at any cost to nature, while trade unions have accused environmentalists of putting nature before workers' needs for jobs, and indeed, for survival.

If we look at the two movements historically there is evidence that labour movements in industrialised countries have viewed nature predominantly in two ways: in the beginning, trade unions were more organised like we think of social movements today. They founded "organizations to advocate and develop gender equality, consumers' interests (the cooperative movement), popular health and welfare, housing, culture in all its aspects, education, leisure activities, and human rights (including anti-colonial

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movements)” (Gallin, 2000,4). For instance, the *International Friends of Nature* were founded 1895 in Vienna by a group of socialists, coming together through an advertisement in the *Arbeiter Zeitung* (*Newspaper for Workers*). In the UK, workers and ‘environmentalists’ joined together on 24 April 1932 for an act of mass trespass when they walked across the grouse moors of Kinder Scout (owned by the landed gentry and wealthy industrialists) to protest at the lack of access to green spaces around the industrial cities of the north of England. The ‘right to roam’ was initiated by the British Workers' Sports Federation (BWSF), largely made up of members and supporters of the Communist Party, which enjoyed significant working class support. For these groups nature was a space for recreation and leisure that needed to be preserved as well as enjoyed.

The second way in which labour organisations have dealt with nature, has been in the context of health and safety concerns for their members. They have fought against the pollution of water, air and soil when this constituted a threat to the health of workers and their families. Most of the time though, health and safety issues are dealt with within the workplace, where unions see to it that workers are protected from the hazards of the production process. Here, one could argue, they care for nature in the form of workers’ bodies, although they may not formulate it this way. They see their work as caring for the social needs of workers of which health is an important part. In the image of nature as a space of recreation or an environment that needs to be protected from pollution, nature becomes labour’s ‘Other’. It is constructed as a pristine place external to society and to the labour process (Smith 1996, 41). In neither case is nature seen as an integral part of the production process, as a source of wealth, or as labour’s ally. This omission was already apparent in the first programme of the German Social Democratic Party, the

Programme of Gotha, where the first paragraph read: "Labor is the source of wealth and all culture, and since useful labor is possible only in society and through society, the proceeds of labor belong undiminished with equal right to all members of society." (cited in Marx 1875). In his critique, Marx argued, "Labor is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (...) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power" (Marx, 1875).

Both dimensions - nature as a source of use value, and human labour power as a part of nature - have been neglected in the history of the labour movement.

For environmental movements nature needs to be defended against uncontrolled and thoughtless industrialisation, and the "productivism" of capital and labour alike. Their point of departure is that there is a fundamental contradiction between production and ecology. In one of her influential publications, Carolyn Merchant formulates it in the following way: "The particular forms of production in modern society – industrial production, both capitalist and state socialist – creates accumulating ecological stresses on air, water, soil, and biota (including human beings) and on society's ability to maintain and reproduce itself over time." (Merchant, 1992, 9) There are many environmental movements (just as there are many different forms of trade unionism, although they do not cover an equally broad political spectrum), from nature conservationists, to environmental NGOs with considerable financial resources (WWF-UK income in 2011 was £57m (WWF-UK, 2011)), to environmental justice movements, socialist ecologists, ecofeminists, and deep ecologists. One cannot do them justice with one definition. It is safe to say though, that when it comes to conflicts between industry and environmental protection they will put environmental protection first – after all,

protecting the environment is their *raison d'être*. What they have in common with the labour movement is a construction of nature as labour's 'Other'. Neither labour movements nor environmental movements see labour and nature as allies, needing each other to produce the material resources necessary for human survival.

The difficulty of seeing labour and nature as inseparable elements for the production of life (since without production there is no human life), lies in their separation historically. In a process that accelerated with the industrial revolution, nature has become (and is still becoming) a private asset, just like the products of labour and nature, tools, machines, and buildings (Smith 2008; Castree 2010). For workers, privatised nature stands on the other side of the capital-labour relationship, it has become capital. Workers experience the protection of nature as a threat, not only to their jobs, but also to their identities as producers. From the point of view of environmentalists, workers are seen to be on the side of capital who regard nature only as an exploitable 'natural resource', a means to an end for production. Both are caught in a contradictory structure that involves a trialectical relationship between labour, capital and nature (Soja, 1996). When unions defend their jobs at the expense of nature, they are at the same time defending the relations of production (the private appropriation of nature) under which they are themselves subordinated. Sweeney (in this volume) describes the paradoxical effects this can have, when unions defend the economic activities of politicians who act in an anti-labour fashion. The same can be said for environmentalists who criticise unions for defending their jobs without suggesting any alternatives that would allow workers a living without being at the mercy of those who own nature and control labour.

What is lived as a conflict between environmental and labour movements is mirrored by academic disciplines' mutual disregard.

***Where's the environment in labour studies, where's the labour in environmental studies?***

The fact that labour studies and environmental studies are separate spheres of research serves to reinforce the failure of researchers to appreciate the importance of their reciprocal significance and contribution. This shortcoming has been carried through to the lecture theatre. It is extremely rare for academic courses on the environment and climate change to discuss issues of labour. Likewise, there are few courses on labour that explore the implications of climate change for working conditions and labour rights. While attention may be paid to production processes such as the impact of new technologies on labour, climate-motivated labour and production changes such as regulations, changes in markets, the migration of production, are rarely discussed. Equally, there is little discussion as to how labour is responding to these changes. For example, what impacts will climate change motivated regulations have on the working lives of those who are employed in high carbon and consequently high risk industries? Work for many, as we know, is more than just bringing in a wage. It provides dignity, identity, and solidarity (Lamont 2000, Collinson, 1992, Räthzel and Uzzell 2011). When industries are attacked (i.e. because they are seen to be damaging to the environment), those who work in those industries may also feel attacked.

It is striking that if one attends conferences on the human dimensions of climate change, very few papers focus on the workplace. With some confidence one can say that even less address labour issues in general or the position and role of trade unions towards

climate change, whether in terms of their policy response or how climate mitigation and adaptation are affecting jobs or workers' rights. Likewise, conferences in the area of labour studies are silent on these issues. In the social environmental sciences – psychology, sociology, or economics - the focus of research, and what is carried across into the lecture theatre, is on changing consumer behaviour and largely comes under the heading of 'behaviour change strategies' (e.g. Darnton 2008). These draw on theories from psychology and behavioural economics that are often individualistic and reductionist because they reduce people to de-socialised monads, taking decisions on their own (cf. Institute for Government, 2009). To add 'influences' from other people does not solve the problem because it only multiplies the number of monads conceived as meeting in a void. The societal relations (relations of production, relations of consumption, political and social power relations (Uzzell and Rätzzel, 2009)) that shape practices are neglected together with the "hardware" of such practices, infrastructures and technologies. Such research tends to concentrate on individual action in the home, in the supermarket, on holiday and through various transport means used to move between these locations. The closest these studies come to the workplace is the car that takes the commuter to work. Sustainable behaviour strategies in the workplace mirror those advocated for the consumers in general, such that research has focussed on how companies can implement, for example, 'green travel plans' or encourage their workforce to recycle waste and turn lights off (Bartlett 2011). While these are valuable measures, they do not get to the heart of the matter, namely the production process itself and its impact on the environment. Environmental social scientists in turn have almost entirely ignored the role of labour in these processes, the impact of climate change on the psychology and sociology of workers, and the potential for collective as opposed to individual action.

The separation between environmental studies, focusing on the effects of production processes on nature, and labour studies focusing on the effects of production processes on workers can be traced back to the separation between natural sciences and social sciences. Bruno Latour (1993) argues that this separation has its origins in the debate between Hobbes and Boyle, the latter arguing on the basis of experimentally created facts, the former on the basis of theories of the social (ibid. 29f). Latour maintains that 'things' and the 'social' co-constitute each other and thus have to be studied in relation to each other. In the same vein we suggest that production processes have to be studied as a relationship between humans and nature evolving within specific societal relations.

Some scholars have taken up the challenge to theorise this relationship. Predominantly, they come from a Marxist tradition (Vorst et.al, 1993, Harvey, 1996, Layfield, 2008 ). For example, O'Connor (1998) develops a theory of the "human interaction with nature" and Foster (2000) re-constructs what he calls "Marx' Ecology", bringing together writings of materialists and of Marx on nature and the human-nature metabolism, while Harvey theorises the social relations of nature from the perspective of a Marxist geography. While ecologists have criticised Marx and Marxists (Goldblatt 1996, Bramwell 1989, Smith 2001) for neglecting nature or conceptualising it only as a means to an end of human reproduction, others, like Pepper (1993), Gare (1995), Merchant (1992) have linked the ecological to Marxist theory. There is a lively debate around a Marxist or socialist ecology, especially in the journals *Capital*, *Nature*, *Socialism* and *Monthly Review*, but it has not been taken up in the fields of labour or environmental studies, with a view of providing a theoretical framework for empirical research. This volume

seeks to bring these two areas of discourse together by joining the writings of academics with who are working at the 'coalface' of these issues, the trades unions.

### ***New movements in the trade union movements***

We use the plural of movement in this title because there is no such thing as a unitary labour or trade union movement. Differences and often conflicts exist on all levels, between sectors, within and between countries, and between unions of the global North and the global South. Nevertheless, while academic research remains largely corralled in its disciplines and sub-disciplines, union movements across the world have been moving fast to incorporate a concern for nature by taking on climate change as an issue of trade union policies. This is why this book, which is the first to address the environmental policies of unions' worldwide, begins with the views of trade unionists in international, national, and local trade unions. They do not purport to represent majority positions in the labour movements. However, they occupy important positions and represent some of the most advanced views of unionists today and thus the possible policies which unions could develop in the future.

The authors represent international unions: Rosemberg is the Policy Officer of Occupational Health & Environment in the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Rossman is international campaign and communications director in the International Union of Food, Farm and Hotel Workers IUF, and Martín Murillo heads an international trade union organisation, especially set up to assist unionists in the global South in their efforts to combat the 'double exposure' effects (Leichenko and O'Brien,



2008) of climate change and the lack of workers' rights. Olsen and Kemter work in the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and responsible for environmental sustainability. We also invited representatives of national unions to contribute their perspectives: Gil works in the Spanish research centre ISTAS, set up by the Spanish union Comisiones Obreras in 1996 and responsible for investigating environmental issues, health and safety and working conditions, Henriksson is an assembly worker in the Volvo car producer plant owned since 2010 by the Chinese Geely Holding Group, and a member of the Swedish metal workers union (IF Metall).

From the perspective of the ILO Olsen and Kemter present a history of labour involvement with nature as one that moves from a concern for workers' health and safety and the pollution of factory environments to a broader concern for climate change and a just transition to decent green jobs. Through this period, nature moves from being seen as a condition for a healthy life, where attention focuses on local spaces (whether in the workplace or for recreation) to being redefined by unions as a global issue in terms of climate change.

As Rosemberg and Murillo argue, this process has been accelerating since the Trade Union Assembly in Nairobi in 2006, where trade unions from all over the world came together to discuss environmental issues for the first time. In the same year the ITUC was founded as a merger between the former International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the World Confederation of Labour. This was also the time when the first programme on climate change was agreed by an international union (Murillo). Since then, there has been a growing interest among trade union officials to incorporate the

environment as an issue of climate change into trade union programmes. Rosemberg analyses how this agenda has developed within the ITUC and is including an increasing number of national unions from across the world. In many national and international unions special positions have been created for unionists to take responsibility for environmental issues and to formulate union positions on climate change.

All the authors in this book argue that this implies a transformation of trade unions as organisations that are solely concerned with workers' lives inside, at best immediately around the factory walls. Cock and Lambert promote the notion of social movement unionism, Gil envisages an eco-unionism, and Henriksson suggests how workers can develop the self-confidence to use their skills and knowledge for a transformation of their industries on the way to just and low carbon societies. Henriksson's perspective is one in which workers cease reacting to the capitalist crises to defend their achievements, but attempt to meet the challenge by embarking on a struggle in which they seek to become the inventors of new forms of production.

International solidarity has been a defining characteristic of trade unions since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Waterman and Timms 2005), but it has usually meant unions supporting each other in their local struggles. The rise of the internet has now made global protest possible but is usually industry/sector specific. To incorporate a global phenomenon like climate change, however, into the trade union agenda requires unions and their members to investigate the global effects of their local actions. In this respect, unions are a perfect example of "glocality" (Meyrowitz 2005), working on the local and the global level simultaneously. Therefore, Sweeney calls on unions to realise this potential, especially the ITUC, and try to convince unions in the USA that they should oppose tar

sand extraction because it will not only damage the area in which tar sands are exploited, but will also add enormously to global greenhouse gas emissions.

An insight into the global effects of local production processes implies that unions broaden their self-definition from a responsibility to their members to a responsibility to society at large, as Gil and Murillo suggest. Rossman emphasises this argument by turning it around. He shows that big business agriculture is one of the most dangerous GHG emitters and polluters of the environment and this immediately affects the health and well-being of workers and small farmers in agriculture. Therefore, he concludes that the struggle for workers' rights is an indispensable part of the struggle to mitigate climate change.

Comprehensive union policies that merge the protection of workers and the protection of nature have several implications for trade union policies. They imply that unions need to (re)invent themselves as social movements, aiming not only to improve their members' lives but to transform societies and the present economic system. This implies, as all the authors in this book argue, that trade unions need to build alliances with environmental movements. Indeed, such alliances are forming in countries around the globe.

In the USA, the Blue-Green Alliance started with collaboration between the Sierra Club and the United Steelworkers union (Stevis, Sweeney, Gingrich). In South Africa, Earthlife is organising courses on environmental issues for unionists and collaborating with COSATU and NUMSA in the *One Million Climate Jobs Campaign* (Cock and Lambert, Uzzell and Rätzzel); in Brazil, the umbrella organisations for environmental organisations

(Forum Brasileiro de ONGs e Movimentos Sociais para o Meio Ambiente e o Desenvolvimento, FBOMS) includes the national trade union CUT as a leading Board member. Some unions, like the STTR in the Amazonian region, have not only allied themselves with environmental movements, but are themselves a grassroots environmental movement (Cândia Veiga and Martin). Here, as in many areas of the global South, the close connection between defending work and defending nature is evident and was exemplified by the famous trade union leader Chico Mendes, who was both a unionist of the rubber tappers and an environmentalist. He paid for his commitment and engagement with his life (Revkin, 2004). This tradition of trade union environmentalism is alive in the Brazilian trade union movement, predominantly among agricultural unions. In other countries an alliance between agricultural workers and unions, and rural communities has yet to be developed. For example, with regards to South Africa, Bennie suggests that South African industrial and mining unions need to understand that rural communities are not necessarily keen to exchange their ways of life for an opportunity to work in what others may perceive as a modern industry, even if they are promised what is conventionally regarded as a better life. The rural communities he researched refuse to accept the label of being poor.

In South Korea and Taiwan, two of the fast industrialising countries of Asia, unions and environmental movements are coming together after they have both seen their support in society dwindle. Liu analyses labour and environmental activities, campaigns and discourses, and suggests where both need to learn from each another in order to not only be able to work together, but also to improve the success of their own political campaigns. In Australia, unions and environmentalists have been working together as early as the 1970s, forming associations like the 'Environmentalists for Employment'

(Burgmann). Today, trade union environmental policies have diversified and so have their alliances with different environmental movements and political parties in Australia (Snell and Fairbrother). In none of the countries examined here are red-green alliances free of frictions and conflicts, due to a history of different discourses and political priorities of the respective movements. Sweeney gives an example of this fragility when he reports that the union 'Laborers' has left the alliance because two transport unions (ATU and TWU) in the alliance supported the decision of the Obama Administration to reject the building of the Keystone X pipeline. Such conflicts illuminate that the "job versus environment" dilemma is far from resolved, even though it is now considered a false dichotomy by many scholars, politicians and unionists who argue that a 'green economy' will provide much more 'green jobs' than might be lost through measures enabling a transformation into low carbon societies.

There are a number of ambiguities in the demand for 'green jobs'. First, green jobs are not necessarily, well paid, safe, and secure jobs as Olsen and Kemter, and Stevis point out. Especially in relation to Australia and the USA, which have a comparatively longer tradition of green jobs and green economic policies, the authors (Stevis, Snell and Fairbrother, and Sweeney) engage with the limitations of these concepts. They argue for a need to question the relationship between 'green jobs' and 'just jobs', to examine the taken-for-granted growth perspective, to take the relationship between different production sectors within a country and globally into account, and to rethink the system of production that has led to climate change. The question is, whether a demand for green jobs leads to "shallow reforms" or whether it transcends the present forms of production (Cock and Lambert) and envisages an economic system beyond the growth paradigm (Barry). However, a radical trade union position that sees capitalism as the

source of the global environmental destruction, does not necessarily lead to the formulation of radical positions on how to combat climate change (Bennie).

Burgmann and Snell and Fairbrother argue that the perspective of green jobs can overcome the jobs vs. environment dilemma by offering unions and workers a way to embrace climate change measures without fearing unemployment. This seems only to be true on a more abstract level of formulating agendas and programmes. However, when a union is faced with the alternative of supporting environmentally damaging productions, which will create jobs immediately or to oppose such a production for the sake of green jobs in an uncertain future, most will opt for the first alternative (Rätzl and Uzzell 2011). A radical agenda, fighting for “system change, not climate change” as demonstrators at the recent COP meetings in Copenhagen (2009) and Durban (2011) demanded, points to the root cause of climate change, namely a profit and therefore growth-oriented production system. While it can (and as some authors argue, must) provide the perspective for a long-term formulation of trade union policies it will not suffice to convince unions at local levels, who also fight for their members’ livelihood in the present. Strategies like the *One Million Climate Jobs Campaign* in South Africa (Cock and Lambert) are essential to develop awareness, arguments, and action for trade union policies at the local level and in the public domain. However, their demands are directed towards governments and sometimes business. They involve unionists and workers as campaigners only, not as makers of their own futures. In our view, these campaigns need to be accompanied by strategies like the one Henriksson is proposing, namely to involve workers directly in designing new forms of productions.

As in the public debates, one can trace a line through the argumentation in this book among those authors (Snell and Fairbrother, Burgmann) who critically advocate the need for so-called reformist strategies by unions to develop viable perspectives out of the climate change threat. Others (Cock and Lambert, Bennie, Barry) have more doubts and see reformism as a potential threat to effective policies that can halt climate change. Stevis terms these differences as weak and strong environmental modernisation and foresees that the opposition to climate change measures now prominent in the USA can only be overcome if the strong environmental modernism argument wins through. Rosa Luxemburg (1999) coined the concept of “revolutionary reformism”, meaning that labour movements have to present alternatives within the day to day political agendas with the aim of improving the situation for workers and the society now. But such alternatives should at the same time make a transformative agenda visible and achievable. They should sow the seeds of alternative forms of working and living in practice. It seems to us that a strategy that links the “green jobs” campaign with a trade union programme that makes use of workers’ skills and knowledge to explore and design ways in which industries (and services for that matter) can be converted, would constitute such a strategy of “revolutionary reformism”. In this context it is noteworthy that although official union documents as well as the views of influential unionists are presented and discussed in political and occasionally scholarly work, we have limited reliable knowledge through either quantitative or qualitative research of what workers in factories and offices think about climate change. In addition to the LOCAW Study<sup>2</sup> which is being undertaken by the authors for the European Commission, we are only aware of the national surveys undertaken by Labour Research Department, on behalf of

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<sup>2</sup> LOCAW: Low Carbon at Work: Modelling agents and organisations to achieve transition to a low carbon Europe. In a study funded by the European Union, the authors, together with researchers in Romania, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and the UK, are investigating these questions in areas of small and heavy industry and public services. <http://www.locaw-fp7.com/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

the TUC in the UK, amongst union 'Green Representatives' on trade union action on environment and climate change in the workplace and the role of the trade union movement.

One of the major obstacles to the success of environmental trade union policies are the different points of departures of unions due to their different national histories, their sectoral anchoring, their strength in terms of membership and their political convictions. Gingrich analyses some of these differences and their effects on climate change policies for unions in the USA and in Sweden. Whether unions are closely related to government and political actors, or more flexible in choosing their allies, makes a significant difference in terms of whether they are willing and able to create new forms of cooperation with environmental movements. There is also a difference between international and national confederations and federations. While an international union may have the vision and organisational capacity to develop a broader perspective for environmental policies, a local union will be much more tied to the immediate, everyday interests of their members, which may act as a serious constraint on them not only envisaging but also practicing a broader social movement unionism. Trade union histories and traditions not only influence the ways in which unions formulate their interests within the societal context at large, they also shape their relations to the state and to labour parties in the respective countries. One of the most pertinent divisions is between the global North and the global South. Uzzell and Rätzzel suggest that the history of colonialism continues to be reflected in North-South relations between unions. While there are multiple differences between Southern and Northern unions, these are cross-cut by what Southern unionists experience as domination by Northern unions due to the latter's superior resources and organising power. While Northern



unions practice solidarity in helping Southern unions with their resources and knowledge, this often comes at a price, namely a desire of Northern unions to influence the political practices of Southern unions. These power relationships thwart the possibilities for developing national and international environmental policies against climate change. To give an example of the potential power of comprehensive international trade union policies, the International Trade Union Confederation has 308 affiliated member organisations in 153 countries and territories, with a total membership of 175 million workers. The *potential* influence of such a body and its constituent members is huge, and if it can be mobilised to take collective action, we might start to see some of the changes which will be necessary across the global North and South if we are slow down and even reverse the pernicious consequences of climate change.

### **For a new research area: environmental labour studies**

The way in which nature and labour are intrinsically linked and equally threatened by globalising Capital provides the theoretical rationale, while the development of environmental trade union policies worldwide provides the empirical rationale for an area of study that we suggest calling *Environmental Labour Studies*.

This book, we argue, proves that such a new field of research is emerging and that its themes, tasks and issues are multiple, urgent and unsolved. That the authors of this book work in departments of Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Economics, and Management, demonstrate that environmental labour studies can and should be multi-

and inter-disciplinary. It can also include different theoretical approaches and different methodologies, ranging from the macro studies of world system theory to the micro studies of workers' identities and everyday practices. There are many omissions in this book as can be expected in any publication especially in a new field of study, but perhaps the most striking one is that the trade union policies, which are mainly in focus here are those of (heavy) industrial unions. In some ways this may not be surprising as these are the industries which have tended to feel vulnerable to criticisms from environmentalists which claim that these industries are largely responsible for carbon emissions, global warming and climate change (e.g. transport, steel, chemical, cement). On the one hand this is an interesting and important counterpoint to the pre-eminence of post-industrial, service economies, as industrialised societies are characterised. On the other, it does exclude the majority of workers in the countries of the North, who work in the service sector and offices, the requirements of which also make a significant contribution to climate change which is often overlooked.

The majority of the authors in this book come from labour studies in one way or another. It is to be hoped that in future this important area will be recognised by environmental social scientists who will be encouraged to investigate labour policies, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on workers and working conditions. A few studies exist on the effects of heat on workers' health and well being (cf. Kjellstron, 2009), but the range of issues identified in this book go beyond this type of analysis and demonstrate that the relationship between work, workers and the environment is multifaceted and complex. As a starting point, we wanted to concentrate specifically on trade union policies. In this respect we hope that this book marks just a

beginning of a moment, when researchers appreciate the need to connect the areas of environmental and labour studies.

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