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The Union Makes Them Strong

A blue-green alliance on climate change adopts a new agenda: jobs

THE ARRIVALS PREDICTABLY DIVIDE THEMSELVES INTO TWO CAMPS, and even the dinner choices—vegetarian pasta or prime rib—reinforce stereotypes of people who, when they aren't coming to blows over logging, mining, or environmental laws, are doing their best to ignore one another—as they seem to be doing tonight. Like wallflowers, the environmentalists cluster at a table near the door: Most are college students; one is a college professor. Many of the younger environmentalists seem nervous, ill at ease, as they talk quietly among themselves. A timid twenty-something with a complicated haircut turns to his tablemates and says, "I'm afraid of the steelworkers."

On the far side of the room, wearing union jackets and caps, the steelworkers trade war stories in defiant tones. One worker describes a 2003 meeting in which Terry Bonds, the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) District 12 director, railed at mining company officials for breaking their contract with the union. "'Wherever you're going to go,'" the unionist quotes Bonds as saying, "'you're going to look up, and we're going to be in your face.'" A smirking blond chimes in with a story about management that ends, "They'd love to get rid of me, but they can't." Such bravado seems foreign to the green side of the room.

But later, during official introductions, dessert forks go down when USWA representative Wayne Holland describes his "passionate dislike" for President George W. Bush. "This is the worst president we've ever seen for workers' rights and issues," he says. "And he's been a disaster, no doubt, for environmental issues." When Sierra Club member Mark Clemmons says he's proud to be a "squeaky little rust atom on the hinge of history," everyone breaks into laughter.

On this weekend in Salt Lake City in March 2004, steelworkers from nearby Kennecott Utah Copper have come together with members of the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club under the guidance of the Public Health Institute, a New York-based nonprofit that helps people build coalitions.

The task at hand: train thirty-year veterans of the labor movement and devoted young conservationists to tally their similarities, pool their resources, and explore whether the jobs-versus-environment debate has distracted them from common aims, or even a common identity.

The 2004 training was but one piece of a broader labor movement, spearheaded in recent years largely by the USWA, to wean the United States off fossil fuels. The goal is to reverse climate change and to start planning for the inevitable: the disappearance of the nation's dominant energy source, probably within a few generations given current rates of use. To leaders of the steelworkers union—which represents 1.2 million members in metalworking, welding, tire making, shipbuilding, transportation, communication, and health care—a shift away from fossil fuels may also be a matter of short-term economic survival. The U.S. economy, including the energy industry, is hemorrhaging jobs overseas and across borders; in the last three years alone, nearly three million jobs have left U.S. soil. And of those jobs remaining, fewer are industrial and fewer are unionized, prompting labor leaders to take some untraditional stances.

"If we hope to maintain a strong industrial economy, we need to reject the notion of a clean environment versus industrial jobs," Leo Gerard, USWA international president, said in October. "We need to get real and get those quality jobs back. And we can't do that without the clean energy industry." By retrofitting buildings to make them energy efficient, Gerard says, by manufacturing energy-efficient appliances, and by building wind turbines, labor could reclaim lost jobs—and protect the environment.

Gerard's vision isn't just a pipe dream: In October, an alliance of six labor unions and environmental groups released a report showing that if the United States pursued a clean energy economy, it would generate 1.4 million new jobs over the next twenty years. Granted, that's not enough to keep pace with current job losses overall, but it's more than enough to offset the ongoing losses in fossil fuel-related industries. And if labor gets in on the ground floor, those could be 1.4 million union jobs.

Steelworker Andy Triplett had no interest in the environment before this March weekend. Tall, with a thin mustache and a goatee, Triplett looks much younger than forty-five, and it seems impossible that he's worked at Kennecott Utah Copper for twenty-six years. He has a high school education and works as a millwright. He fixes machinery—everything from pumps and furnaces to gearboxes and cranes—and manufactures new parts as necessary. Though he's quiet and exceedingly polite, Triplett, Local 392's unit chair at Kennecott's copper refinery, burns with the political fire of

labor's activist past. The prospect of spending the weekend with a bunch of Sierra Club members was a tough sell for him: "I was thinking, 'Why would I want to go into a deal where people are so closed-minded about mines?'"

With a Sierra Club partner, Triplett is assigned to teach a session about the term "environment." The two are given a primer defining the term as "the place where people live, work, study, play, and worship." By the time he stands in front of the class, Triplett seems to have undergone an epiphany—his face is lit up, his body language invigorated. The definition, he explains in animated tones, means that the "environment" is not a distant place that only wealthy backpackers can reach; it's part of everyday experience. "We could get the fear out of the debate by educating people about this definition," he says to the class. Later he would say of the experience, "My eyes were opened so wide. I saw how much more we have in common."

Throughout the weekend, union members continue to pair up with environmentalists to teach the group an assigned topic related to global change. After each pair presents its lesson, the teams debate it in more depth at their tables. A miner might hear about sustainable logging from a Sierra Club member, who might in turn hear what it's like to worry about outsourced industrial jobs. By the second day, when the topic turns to conserving resources and cutting carbon emissions, the ideas around the tables have become confident and far-reaching: Construction workers should use local products to cut down on transportation pollution; electricity should be generated locally to decrease energy loss over transmission lines, thus cutting energy demand; industrial workers should educate their employers about their ability to cut pollution—and then demand that employers actually do so. Other strategies include helping communities fight local polluters and educating consumers to boycott offenders.

But the invisible backdrop to all of the discussion is the topic of job security. Perhaps because it's designed mainly to break down cultural barriers, not forge strategy, the Public Health Institute training deliberately omits any formal session on the grim statistics of industrial employment. Nobody mentions that from 1980 to 1999, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in U.S. coal mining and oil refining fell 66 percent and 40 percent respectively, amid an overall decline in industrial jobs. Nobody mentions that oil and gas industry jobs are expected to decline by 28 percent through 2012 as automation increases, domestic supplies dwindle, and companies shift exploration and production overseas. Nobody mentions how far the United States lags behind Europe, where employment

in wind energy alone tripled from 1998 to 2003 and is expected to triple again, to two hundred thousand jobs, by 2020.

Still, there is a palpable sense that jobs are disappearing, that blue and green alike are going to have to deal with something after fossil fuels, and that global warming is undoubtedly an issue that unions must tackle with all the force they have historically mustered. Tom Maki, a steelworkers representative living in Rock Springs, Wyoming, a hub of the nation's current coal bed methane boom, is particularly insistent: "If we don't do it, who will?"

He could have put it another way: If we don't do it, what will we do? In 2003, union membership levels were at their lowest ever. Only 12.9 percent of all workers belonged to a union, compared with 20.1 percent just twenty years earlier. Those numbers are even more dismal outside the public sector. Only 8.2 percent of the private labor force was organized in 2003. "Our side is weak because progressive political forces spend more time being divided than coming up with a plan," says Les Leopold, executive director of the Public Health Institute. "Our theory is that unless labor becomes green, it will die."

The labor movement was once the heart of the liberal movement in the United States. Trade unionists were the ones, after all, who successfully fought for a five-day workweek, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, child labor laws, health and safety regulations, and workers' compensation. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, labor pioneered sit-down strikes, boycotts, and work stoppages, which influenced all subsequent progressive movements in the United States. Suffragists, civil rights leaders, feminists, consumer advocates, and environmentalists have all used tools perfected by labor whether they realized it or not.

Once upon a time, labor was a force to be reckoned with by corporations, the federal government, and corrupt union leaders themselves. The head of the United Mine Workers of America, John L. Lewis, not only negotiated directly with President Franklin Roosevelt, but also defied him and President Harry S. Truman with three coal strikes during World War II. When Roosevelt seized the mines, workers struck again against their federal operators. In 1969, when corrupt union leaders collaborated with mine operators to block new worker safety laws and provisions for black-lung compensation, forty thousand coal miners organized a wildcat strike in defiance of the United Mine Workers leadership.

Despite the radical decrease in union membership in the last twenty years, labor remains the largest progressive bloc in the country, representing about a fifth of the voters in the 2000 election, according to a University of

Pennsylvania survey. As with any social movement, the strength of unions lies with its rank-and-file members—the ones willing to trudge out into the snow, to bring new and sometimes controversial information to union hall meetings, the ones willing to trust their leaders enough to set aside stereotypes and hang out with a bunch of Sierra Club members for a weekend.

This would not be the first time labor has advocated a shift away from fossil fuels and contributed thoughtful planning to achieve it. In the 1960s Tony Mazzocchi, a legendary organizer with the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, began a campaign for a federal plan to ease the transition to clean energy—a plan he called "'a Superfund for workers,'" says Joe Anderson, director of the nonprofit Labor Institute West, an arm of the Public Health Institute. "He used to say 'we want these workers to be treated as well as we treat dirt.'"

Recently revived by steelworkers and others under the moniker "Just Transitions," Mazzocchi's plan is loosely modeled on the G.I. Bill of 1944, which provided returning World War II veterans with a living wage and college tuition. Just Transitions, funded by a tax on polluting corporations, would offer assistance to communities disrupted by mine or refinery shutdowns, train workers to work in the clean energy industry, and continue providing them health insurance and benefits while they find new jobs.

Mazzocchi, a coalition builder par excellence, provided the intellectual inspiration for today's blue-green movement. In the late '50s, he helped found the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and in the early '70s he co-chaired the first Earth Day and worked with Ralph Nader to pressure Congress to pass the Occupational Safety and Health Act. In 1996 he formed the Labor Party. By moving beyond the "bread and butter" issues—Do you have a job? How much money do you make? What are the benefits like?—Mazzocchi left a trail for today's union leaders to follow.

Steelworker David Foster, elected in 1997 as the director of USWA District 11, appears to have inherited Mazzocchi's role. His job involves working with members from Iowa to Alaska. He represents everyone from steel-mill workers and coal miners to bus drivers and nurses. A former bricklayer, Foster is the consummate working guy who moved up the ranks and gained respect from his fellow workers as an effective organizer.

But he has also become an increasingly familiar face on the environmental circuit. In 1999, Foster scaled a 180-foot-tall redwood to meet with forest activist and tree-sitter Julia Butterfly Hill. His efforts not only symbolized the lengths to which he would go to reach environmentalists, but also lent credibility to a movement easily dismissed by industrial workers. He is part

of a new generation of unionists that sees the dichotomy between environmental stewardship and jobs as false. "Environmentalists are our prime allies in how to regain control over the economy," he says firmly. "The wave of job loss in the last four years—2.5 million industrial jobs—has nothing to do with environmental regulations and everything to do with a global economy that is bent on maximizing profits. Labor is fighting the erosion of workers' rights, and the environmental movement is fighting the erosion of environmental protection." Given the growing extremism in the corporate world, Foster says, the opportunities to work together "are limitless."

Foster's point is easily illustrated by the birth of the Salt Lake City conference, which grew out of a nearby conflict that epitomized corporate excesses.

Union jobs are scarce in Utah, but USWA Local 392 represents more than one thousand miners, refinery and smelter workers, maintenance workers, and truck drivers at Kennecott Utah Copper. Each day at Kennecott, workers pull a quarter-million tons of rock out of an open-pit copper mine west of Salt Lake City that was once a mountain. Drivers on Interstate 80, which skirts the eastern shore of the Great Salt Lake, can see the smelter's twelve-hundred-foot smokestack. If you're an environmentalist here, you've probably fumed about the crater that's now almost three miles wide and three-quarters of a mile deep, or about the smokestack emissions. And if you're a mine worker, chances are you've assumed environmentalists were out to kill your job.

But those stereotypes hid a common cause that became apparent in the spring of 2003. Rio Tinto, the Melbourne-based corporation that owns Kennecott and has mining operations on six continents, was trying to quietly settle a groundwater pollution case with state and local officials. When the company and the state tried to fast-track Rio Tinto's plan to dump its mine sludge into the Great Salt Lake, local Sierra Club member Ivan Weber hit the roof and looked for allies. He found them in steelworkers, who packed the next public hearing on the dumping permit, making up more than half the crowd. Faced with increased public pressure, the company withdrew its proposal and has since had to revise its groundwater cleanup plans.

Steelworkers, it turned out, had been primed to help environmentalists by Rio Tinto itself. In June of 2003, after twenty months of talks, Rio Tinto and the Kennecott Coordinated Bargaining Committee agreed upon a union contract. Two days later, Rio Tinto laid off 120 workers. Although many of those workers have since retired or returned to work, the case is still under arbitration and union members are still seething over the company's actions.

"That torqued my jaw," says Terry Bonds, USWA District 12 director and head of the bargaining committee. A former roughneck in the Gulf Coast oil fields, and not one to back down from a good fight, Bonds speaks with a Texas drawl that can convey bitter rage and sweet humor in the span of a sentence. "We were in a labor dispute; we were going to take them on in whatever avenue we could find," he says. "We learned that when green-collar workers and blue-collar workers get together, we're stronger." The honey comes back into his voice as he adds that groundwater problems ultimately affect the lives of an entire community. "We're tree huggers, too," he says, smiling. "We just don't fall in love with the tree."

At the time of the groundwater victory, the steelworkers union had been holding weekend trainings on global warming throughout the country. Six months later, the union hired the Public Health Institute to bring Kennecott's mine workers and environmentalists together in Salt Lake City.

"I think the Kennecott story is one that will be replicated around the country," says Tanya Tolchin with the Sierra Club's Partnerships Program. "Now more than ever, people are looking to form new alliances and find more common ground."

Other blue-green alliances have been coalescing in fits and starts for more than a decade. About ten years ago, Andy Stern and Jane Perkins created the Blue-Green Working Group around their kitchen table. Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and Perkins, former head of Friends of the Earth, invited friends from both movements to start talking about green solutions, particularly for global warming, that keep workers in mind.

"It represents a maturity or an epiphany for the environmental community," says Kevin Knobloch, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists and a member of the working group, "that we've come to recognize how important it is to support policies that preserve and create jobs."

The working group originally included members of SEIU, the steelworkers, and the latest incarnation of Mazzocchi's oil and atomic workers union; it also included representatives of the former Union of Needletrades, Textiles and Industrial Employees, which in 2004 merged with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union to become UNITE HERE!

Members of the United Auto Workers, United Mine Workers of America, and the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers attended early meetings, says Dan Becker, director of the Sierra Club's global warming program and the "green" co-chair of the Blue-Green Working Group. "Sometimes

[the alliances] worked; other times they were blown up by people who didn't want blue-green actions."

Eventually, a nucleus formed and the group met regularly. In one of the group's first public announcements in 2002, members of the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council stood with their union counterparts at a press conference that challenged President Bush's climate change plan, which the coalition said would increase carbon emissions over the next ten years. After that salvo, however, the group's recommendations gathered dust and the members drifted apart.

But in early fall of 2004, the Oakland-based nonprofit Redefining Progress approached the Blue-Green Working Group with a report outlining how the United States would benefit economically from a clean energy policy. Redefining Progress, which provides economic analyses to promote sustainable development, recommended an industrial policy that would cut U.S. carbon emissions in half in twenty years and create 1.4 million jobs. The plan included a fifty-state breakdown on the job growth. In October 2004, the Working Group, of which Mazzocchi's spiritual heir, David Foster, is the "blue" co-chair, held press conferences in ten states, touting the plan. The group also took out advertisements in eight regional newspapers, taunting President Bush for his refusal to recognize that jobs and the clean energy industry go hand in hand.

The Redefining Progress report, based on the U.S. Department of Energy's own data, said that some of the new jobs would come directly from building new renewable energy sources and energy efficiencies. Other jobs would result indirectly, the report says, since the average household would save $1,275 per year—that's $76 billion nationwide—on energy costs. That money could then stimulate jobs unrelated to energy production.

Daniel Kammen, founding director of the Renewable and Appropriate Energy Laboratory, recently analyzed thirteen independent studies concerning clean energy and employment in Europe and the United States. A physicist, engineer, and economist at the University of California at Berkeley, Kammen found that every technology in the renewables industry generates more jobs per average megawatt of power than does the coal and natural gas industry. How many jobs, exactly, depends on the assumptions made about the particular mix of solar, wind, and biomass. Wind, for example, creates far more jobs than fossil fuels initially do (from milling steel for the wind turbines, then installing them) and employs modestly more people than fossil fuels after the initial surge. But that advantage eventually decreases because wind farms are rather reliable. Both photovoltaic and

biomass systems employ dramatically fewer workers at first, but gain strong advantages over fuel processing for coal and gas plants in the long term, mostly in operations and maintenance jobs.

In any case, mainly because of increasing automation, the once job-rich fossil fuel-related industries now have a relatively poor record of creating employment. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, fuel production over the last ten years has increased at the same time that jobs in mining and in the oil and gas industry have declined.

"Conventional energy isn't labor intensive; it's capital intensive," explains Howard Geller, an energy expert who heads the Boulder, Colorado-based Southwest Energy Efficiency Project. Geller cites coal as an example. Across the nation, he points out, the coal industry accounts for about sixty thousand jobs—half the workforce of twenty years ago, despite a 37 percent increase in coal production over the same period. Through 2012, coal-mining jobs are expected to decline by another 15 percent, even factoring in increased production.

Part of the reason, says Geller, is that domestic coal production is shifting from the Appalachian region to places like Wyoming, where the norm is mechanized strip mining that employs enormous haul trucks, not vast labor forces. According to the Wyoming Mining Association, the state produced 264 million tons of coal in 1995 and employed about 4,400 people; in 2003, the state produced a record 376 million tons with only 4,700 employees. That's a 42 percent increase in production and only a 9.5 percent increase in jobs.

Leaders in Europe have already caught on to the benefits, including increased employment, of shifting to renewable energy. Many countries in the European Union have established subsidies to guarantee renewable-electricity providers a profitable price per kilowatt-hour of electricity, which stimulates investment and will eventually lower the cost of such electricity. The European Union has also directed that 12.5 percent of its energy must come from renewable sources by 2010; has set a greenhouse gas reduction goal of 15 percent by the same deadline; and has signed on to the Kyoto Protocol. To meet those latter two commitments, the portion of the European energy pie served up by renewables could exceed 12.5 percent.

"Ten years ago Germany had no wind [energy]," says Kammen, "Now they have three times the wind [energy] the United States has. And in some parts of the country, they get a quarter of their energy from wind. It doesn't have to be that hard a thing to do." In Denmark, which makes half the world's turbines, the wind industry employs twenty thousand people.

According to the European Wind Energy Association, European companies currently control 85 percent of the world market for wind turbine manufacturing. U.S. companies account for only 9 percent. It may be no coincidence that, in 1999 alone, the last year for which figures are available, the federal government gave the oil, natural gas, coal, and nuclear industries $2.8 billion in subsidies, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. By comparison, the subsidies for solar and wind energy totaled only $134 million.

Since the early '80s, economists have known that the money going to fossil fuels and nuclear power plants would create more jobs if it were channeled into renewable energy, says Richard Grossman, who worked on blue-green alliances over energy and jobs almost thirty years ago and who now works with the nonprofit Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy. "We're no closer than we were twenty-five years ago. It's about money and the law and the will and who's making the decisions."

To catch up with Europe, the federal government would need to boost its research and development budget for energy. Since 1980, Kammen says, federal research and development budgets for energy have dipped from about $7 billion in 1980 to less than $3 billion in 1995. Congress also would need to set a generous goal of generating 20 percent of U.S. energy consumption from renewable sources, which Kammen says could yield three times the number of jobs produced by fossil fuels. Although eighteen states currently have individual goals ranging from 10 percent to 20 percent renewable, there is no talk of implementing a national standard.

For Triplett, the millwright and refinery unit chair at Kennecott Utah Copper, these are serious times. Aside from Bush's assault on labor and the general decline of unions, Triplett is faced with a likely outsourcing of his own job to a nonunion company in the United States. A grandfather at age forty-five, he knows he's too old to start a new career, too young to retire. But he finds hope in new alliances forged with environmentalists, and in the Just Transitions plan that he and other workers might someday follow.

Now that the environment means something tangible to him, he's also bent on figuring out his role in its protection. "It is incumbent upon us as union workers and miners to live up to these [environmental] laws," he says now. "We have a personal responsibility to make sure companies are living up to what they're supposed to do." To Triplett, this is not just about protecting local hunting grounds or fishing holes. At the union hall in dusty downtown Magna, between Salt Lake City and the Great Salt Lake, he shows a video about global warming and passes out booklets titled "Global

Warming and Working People." He admits that the blue-green movement is only beginning to get traction, but says he wants to let steelworkers know "the Sierra Club is not this evil thing out to take your job."

Triplett came to the Public Health Institute training with his buddy Scott Mullins, his counterpart in Kennecott's smelter unit. Mullins, a stocky guy with blond hair and a formidable jaw that visibly tenses when he mentions Rio Tinto, has not embraced his newfound green cause as fervently as Triplett. Mullins has little immediate reason to fear for his job. As a materials handler who works in the blast-furnace environs of the copper smelter, he does skilled work in a dangerous job that won't likely be contracted out to nonunion private companies.

"Is my every waking minute consumed with the environment?" he asks. "No. I would not consider myself an environmentalist. But now I ask myself, 'What would I do on a certain issue to help fight that fight?' This is going to sound corny, but we only have one Earth, and we're responsible for what we do with it. We've got to do everything we can for our children, grandchildren, and the generations after that."