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Published by: Forest History Society and American Society for Environmental History
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3985426
Accessed: 02/01/2009 15:21

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By the early 1980s, most Americans seemed to believe that environmentalism and labor were fundamentally at odds. Many workers viewed environmentalists as elitist and aloof, as “extremists” who were callously indifferent to the economic growth and job opportunities essential to the well-being of ordinary working people. During the 1970s, trade unionists and environmental activists conflicted, sometimes bitterly, over issues from the Alaskan oil pipeline and the supersonic transport (SST) to nuclear power, energy policy, land use, and various state or national “bottle bills.” Nearly half the membership of the AFL-CIO may have deserted the Democratic Party to vote for Ronald Reagan in 1980, and some poll-watchers surmised that these workers were drawn to the former actor’s simplistic, pro-growth, anti-environmental stance.¹

Some scholars questioned this assumption. In their pathbreaking 1982 book on environmental blackmail, Fear at Work: Job Blackmail, Labor, and the Environment, Richard Kazis and Richard L. Grossman rightly noted the “frequent labor-environmental cooperation” on occupational safety and health and similar matters during the 1970s (but they also glumly concluded that “highly publicized conflicts have led to the perception that environmentalism and unionism do not mix”). Subsequent studies also recorded instances of cooperation between unions and environmentalists, but still referred to an “Initial Labor-Management Alliance” against environmentalists, mentioned labor’s “innate suspicion of environmentalists,” or observed how cooperation between organized labor and environmentalists “contradicts conventional wisdom.” Politicians, the media, and many American citizens largely accepted that labor and the environmental movement had irreconcilable differences, an attitude that continues in the late 1990s.²

In fact, organized labor had demonstrated relatively strong support for many environmental initiatives prior to 1970. Long before most Americans became aware of such issues, labor organizations and union members contributed to the
groundswell of public concern that produced the environmental movement of the late 1960s. Unions also helped spread awareness of environmental issues among working people, who were far removed from the professional middle class usually identified with environmentalism. Often exhibiting a sophisticated understanding of environmental issues, unions adopted relatively radical positions that were strikingly at odds with the views of the employers with whom they were supposedly allied against environmentalism.

Labor's role in the flowering of environmentalism in America does not yet appear in mainstream labor history, which focuses more on the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements of the 1960s, but almost entirely ignores the environmental movement. Even those rare scholars who examine labor's environmentalist activities seldom explore the record before the late 1960s. In reality, the story of labor environmentalism reaches back to the two decades following World War II. Elements of American labor were so precocious in their environmental advocacy that these early activities of concerned unionists and their allies can legitimately be called *proto-environmentalism*.

This activism took varying forms and passed through different stages from the 1940s through the 1970s. During the stable, prosperous, "golden years" of the late 1950s and early 1960s, workers and their union representatives showed concern about air and water pollution, issues that began chiefly as public health concerns. They similarly took an interest in more traditional conservationist issues such as outdoor recreation and wildlife and wilderness preservation. Since most Americans through the mid-1960s viewed the two major branches of proto-environmentalism—conservationism and anti-pollutionism—as separate, distinct, and unrelated causes, unions were in the unusual position of showing concern about pollution and related threats to human health before most conservation organizations, and expressing interest in wilderness conservation before other pollution fighters and public health advocates. Consequently, early labor environmentalists anticipated later developments by combining these two approaches within one organizational structure.

As these different concerns gradually fused together into the environmental movement circa 1970, and the movement grew in strength, assertiveness, and conceptual reach, many unions and unionists joined in this process, growing more strident in their environmental demands. Environmentally conscious labor leaders and union members, situated as they were at the crossroads of progressive politics, again preceded most of the rest of the environmental movement in conceptually linking environmental problems with wider social and economic issues, a project environmentalist organizations had only tentatively begun by the early 1970s. Labor's environmental enthusiasm continued into the early 1970s, as unionists joined environmentalists in supporting passage of crucial environmental and worker health and safety measures. But the Oil Embargo of 1973, the growing energy crisis of the 1970s, the onset of chronic stagflation, the pressure of foreign competition, and other economic and social stresses increasingly put both sides of this budding alliance on the defensive and drove a wedge between them. Worried workers moved closer to management's anti-environmental views, and
both unions and environmentalists largely abandoned the earlier vision of a common front for social, economic, and environmental reform.

Organized labor’s early interest in the control of air and water pollution represented a significant step beyond traditional trade union preoccupation with wages and work conditions. Union leaders and members grew concerned about pollution’s wider public health impact on union members and their families, neighbors, and communities outside the customary center of attention, the workplace. Such broader public health concerns were part of a general trend in organized labor during the 1950s and 1960s toward seeking a greater and more active role in working-class community life beyond the factory gates, including participation in education, recreation, charity work, and counseling and social services for members (and often nonmembers). Public health campaigns against pollution were usually anthropocentric in conception and intent, so they did not require the advanced ecological sensibilities that developed among portions of the American public by the late 1960s. While antipollution crusades based on public health worries had occurred sporadically for decades, a greatly expanded public health/antipollution impulse became the most important and powerful—even defining—strand of postwar environmentalism, setting it apart from earlier conservationism. Labor organizations stood at the forefront of early calls for controlling environmental pollution, a position in stark contrast to that of most corporate employers.4

Labor’s visible postwar interest in air pollution control started rather suddenly in October 1948 after the infamous “Killer Smog” incident in Donora, Pennsylvania. This early air pollution disaster, which killed twenty people and sickened nearly half of the more than thirteen thousand people in this heavily industrialized area outside of Pittsburgh, made the front page of the New York Times two days in a row and drew some of the first truly national attention to air pollution. Among the victims were members of the United Steelworkers, and the union blamed a local branch of the United States Steel Corporation for the poisonous fumes that caused the tragedy. When industry-friendly Pennsylvania officials hesitated to fully investigate the incident, the union declared that “protocol should not be permitted to stand in the way of protecting our workmen, their jobs, and the welfare of the community” and called for an investigation by federal authorities. Finding federal officials similarly hesitant, and fearing a cover-up of the incident by state and federal authorities, the Steelworkers launched what they called an “independent and unbiased” investigation of the disaster with a $10,000 grant from the union’s founder, Philip Murray. While the federal government ultimately glossed over the incident and absolved local industrial polluters of direct responsibility, the effort of the large and powerful United Steelworkers union to seek the truth and fix corporate culpability about a highly visible environmental disaster drew attention from other unions.5

Several years passed before the federal government began taking significant action on air pollution, so federal records that might give evidence of union concern are scant. State and local activities on the matter were also limited and sporadic through this period. As a result of the generally scarce governmental or
press attention to air pollution during the early 1950s, it is difficult to ascertain to what degree either union leaders or rank-and-file members were aware of or concerned about the issue. Only after the 1955 merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations into the AFL-CIO, together with a decrease in Cold War paranoia and labor's demonstration of its overall lack of radicalism, did the political establishment recognize organized labor as speaking with one unified, legitimate voice. By 1958, national labor representatives regularly testified in favor of federal proposals to control water pollution, and AFL-CIO officials served on the steering committees for the first two National Conferences on Air Pollution in 1958 and 1962.6

While the available evidence is limited, some local labor organizations also sought to comprehend and confront air pollution problems during these years. On January 28, 1959, District Council Number 1 of the International Chemical Workers, based in Mulberry, Florida, reported how an "aroused membership" had "called a special open meeting" at their local office "to discuss the effects of air pollution on the health of the residents and employees in the local phosphate mining and chemical producing area." Around the same time, a member of the Bridge and Tunnel Workers Union from Buffalo, New York, wrote a letter to the Air Pollution Medical Branch of the U.S. Public Health Service requesting that it investigate "an alleged extraordinary death rate from 'cancer'" among his co-workers. Such evidence suggests that, like the nation as a whole, union members' awareness and concern about air pollution in the workplace and in the wider community developed and spread during the 1950s, and that workers' awareness of potential health risks from pollution appeared quite advanced in comparison to that of their fellow citizens.7

In 1963, when the federal government greatly expanded its role in air pollution control through the first Clean Air Act, Andrew J. Biemiller, director of the AFL-CIO's department of legislation, offered strong support of the proposed law in a statement for Senator Edmund S. Muskie's subcommittee on air and water pollution. Noting that his union members had "a vital interest in protecting the purity of the air around us, just as they have an interest in protecting the purity of America's water supply," Biemiller showed a relatively sophisticated understanding of the environmental implications of the problem when he argued that air pollution was a serious, growing, nationwide problem requiring immediate federal action, a radical position at the time. By contrast, American industry insisted, and most other Americans tacitly agreed, that air and water pollution were strictly local problems best solved by nearly nonexistent state and local control agencies. Using strongly environmentalist rhetoric, Biemiller also emphasized the health risks of air pollution: "We have at stake the health and safety of the American people. Adequate far-sighted motion now can protect the health of our citizens from the injurious effects of air pollution. Such action now will save the next generation from serious health hazards and from far greater air pollution costs which we failed to pay in this generation." National and state AFL-CIO representatives offered similar testimony on later expansions of the federal air pollution control program during the mid-1960s, calling for immedi-
ate federal action and hammering home the health risks, even as corporate America diligently tried to minimize knowledge of the health impacts of air pollution.8

After World War II, water pollution was a more established and better understood problem than air pollution, so advocating its control was less novel or advanced. Union members also stood to enjoy significant employment gains from federally subsidized construction of water treatment facilities, so they had an ulterior motive in supporting the federal water pollution control program. Here again, unions demonstrated environmentally progressive views at odds with those of industry. In testimony at a 1958 congressional hearing to consider renewing and expanding the federal program, AFL-CIO legislative representative George D. Riley strongly supported the measure: “We endorsed and worked for the passage of the 1956 law in a race against a deadline for expiration of the previous act. . . . We stand for plentiful supplies of the three main essentials of life—clean, safe water, pure air, and safe food.” Riley offered a long and sophisticated analysis of how population and industrial growth increasingly taxed the country’s limited supply of fresh water. He also argued, in opposition to industrialists, that water pollution was a national problem and warned the assembled congressmen of industry’s underhanded efforts to eliminate federal funding for “urgent public necessities” such as water and air pollution control. After Riley’s testimony, the House subcommittee chairman and bill sponsor, Minnesota Democrat John A. Blatnik, commended his preparation and the AFL-CIO’s record of cooperation on water pollution control, noting how “they have given us splendid support in our battle of 2 years ago, and followed through to give every assistance they could to make the program work as effectively as possible.”9

The nation’s leading labor organization offered further support for the federal water pollution control program through the mid-1960s, adopting an increasingly sophisticated and ecologically aware position much closer to conservationist groups such as the Wilderness Society and the Izaak Walton League than to their own industrial employers. In 1961, even before the appearance of Silent Spring, Rachel Carson’s famous exposé of the pesticide industry, AFL-CIO legislative representative John T. Curran warned congressmen of the known and unknown health hazards and possible ecological risks of various “new and exotic industrial wastes . . . [at] this time not capable of treatment,” but capable of interfering with the treatment of traditional sewage. Later statements from federation representatives noted the potential dangers both of radioactive and chemical wastes in the nation’s water supply, as well as the threat of ecological damage from thermal pollution of waterways, a recently discovered additional worry. In 1966, legislative representative James F. Doherty went so far as to declare, in terms more characteristic of the greater environmental alarm of the late 1960s, that the very nature of modern American life threatened the environment: “The postwar population surge, concentration of more and more people in supercities, the expanding uses of water, the proliferation of human and industrial wastes reducing water supply . . . for human uses and enjoyment—all have contributed to a situation which will produce enormous economic and social conse-
quences if allowed to prevail.” While pollution control was obviously never the AFL-CIO’s primary concern, it still took the issue seriously, favored it consistently, and discussed it in terms and arguments sophisticated for the late 1950s and early 1960s, when most Americans were just becoming aware of the issue.10

Organized labor’s concern about the public health and employment aspects of air and water pollution control transcended self-interest. It reflected an enlightened pragmatism that many Americans did not yet share; most of the public health and pollution-control advocates who so strongly influenced the development of environmentalism during the 1960s also shared a similar self-interest. During the 1950s and 1960s, American unions were also concerned about other environmental problems that posed no direct threat to health and often promised no job opportunities. Workers joined other Americans in rediscovering the natural beauty of the great outdoors, and by the late 1950s, organized labor supported federal proposals regarding outdoor recreation and wilderness preservation. Although some local unions rejected initiatives that threatened potential local development and jobs, union support for wilderness conservation before 1970 is striking in view of later events and assumptions.11

One reason for organized labor’s support of outdoor recreation and wilderness preservation stemmed from its anticipation of increased leisure time for working Americans. During the early postwar decades, when a prosperous nation saw wages, living standards, and home ownership rates steadily rising for the middle class and working class alike, many labor experts assumed that increased automation and productivity would bring shorter workweeks and steadily improving levels of general prosperity. Many also believed that experiencing nature could be a constructive way for workers to fill additional leisure time. This line of reasoning surfaced in George Riley’s statement favoring a bill to create a National Wilderness Preservation System in 1958. Arguing that the American people increasingly appreciated the recreational value of wilderness, Riley refuted the charges of development interests and major employers that such experience was a luxury only for a wealthy elite. He declared that wilderness preservation would benefit the American people much more than commercial exploitation by a greedy few.12

More strikingly, Riley anticipated later environmentalists in offering the AFL-CIO’s second reason for supporting the bill: “We favor the preservation of wilderness areas for reasons other than recreation. Wilderness has practical values, even though they cannot be measured in dollars, of obvious benefit to the Nation.” He continued offering various relatively advanced conservationist justifications for wilderness as an effective means of soil conservation and flood control, as well as a place for wildlife to breed for human sport and food. “Finally,” Riley concluded, “the scientific value of wilderness should be stressed. There the processes of nature can be studied. Man has learned and will continue to learn there about natural processes, about the recurring cycles of birth, growth, decay, and death.” As with air and water pollution control, the issue of wilderness preservation prompted the AFL-CIO to line up with the still small conservationist groups against industrial lobbies such as the National Association of Manufacturers.
The federation grew more strident in this commitment during the early 1960s, even calling wilderness a soul-restoring spiritual antidote to an over-urbanized, over-mechanized society and urging federal legislators not to make it too accessible to motor vehicles, a notable and unusual position given Americans' obsession with the automobile and the role of unions in its manufacture.¹³

Not surprisingly, local unions did not always want nearby wilderness or historic preservation projects to obstruct employment gains. Workers in Washington, D.C., rejected a proposal for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park in the late 1950s. A decade later, various locals in northern Indiana fought a long and bitter battle against federal protection of part of the Indiana Dunes that would prevent a major construction project. Still, even at the local level, overall support for most preservation efforts apparently existed. In 1958, two major lumber workers' unions in the Pacific Northwest went against their industries to support wilderness preservation. Union representative Earl Hartley called on visiting U.S. senators to save areas of western wilderness before it was too late, arguing that such forest lands were more valuable as parts of “a wilderness preservation system for the good of all people” than as mere timber for commercial exploitation. At other field hearings in 1958 and 1959, western locals of the United Mine Workers and the International Association of Machinists also favored the proposal for a new national wilderness preservation system. Lodge 130 of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers in Butte, Montana, noted that the “availability to all Americans of the beauty and solitude of wilderness areas where our wildlife may be saved from extinction depends upon your favorable action upon this bill” and urgently requested that senators resist the pressure of greedy resource extractors and pass the wilderness bill. The overall story remained the same into the 1960s, when Chicago steelworkers fought to preserve the Indiana Dunes while locals and state organizations of the United Auto Workers (UAW) promoted the creation of new wilderness areas from Redwoods National Park to National Lakeshores in Michigan and Wisconsin.¹⁴

By the late 1960s, as the entire nation became more aware of environmental issues, environmentalism entered a new phase of increased militancy, and organized labor followed suit. The more progressive industrial unions led in this shift, particularly the UAW, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), the United Steelworkers, and the United Farm Workers (UFW). Even the more conservative AFL-CIO showed considerably greater environmental awareness. Under Walter P. Reuther, the UAW took the lead as the most environmentally activist union in America. With his profound personal love of nature, his insistence upon a wider community role for labor unions, and his bold vision of a mass popular front promoting sweeping social reforms, Reuther readily included environmental protection among the other major planks of his platform. As early as 1956, the union fought for and achieved public hearings on the Atomic Energy Commission's decision to build the experimental Fermi fast breeder nuclear reactor near Detroit. The UAW subsequently demonstrated considerable interest in land use, wilderness preservation, and pollution control. In 1965, long before such events were commonplace, the union organized and hosted a "United Ac-
tion for Clean Water Conference" that brought together more than one thousand union members and officials, conservationists, and community leaders. Reuther proclaimed his hope that the meeting might mark the "beginning of a massive mobilization of citizens . . . of a popular crusade not only for clean water, but also for cleaning up the atmosphere, the highways, the junkyards and the slums and for creating a total living environment worthy of free men." At a time when most conservation groups remained relatively small, isolated, and narrowly focused, Reuther brought together unionists, conservationists, and community organizers in an alliance to combat problems of both the urban and the natural environment, an ambitious project that gained wider support after the first Earth Day in 1970.15

Under Reuther, the UAW grew more ambitious in its environmental goals. In 1967, the union created a Department of Conservation and Resource Development under the leadership of vice president Olga M. Madar, who also remained head of the union's Department of Recreation and Leisure-Time Activities. The Department of Conservation encouraged members to take part in solving the air and water pollution problems and other natural resource issues of their various communities, states, provinces, and nations. Under the hard-driving "Miss Madar," the union became ever more strident in its public statements and actions on environmental matters. During congressional hearings in 1967 regarding a proposed National Trails System, UAW legislative representative Franklin Wallick called for the creation of both an urban and a rural trail system for public recreation, despite assertions that the nation could afford only one or the other, and he even urged restraints on the use of automobiles.16

That same year, Olga Madar testified before the Muskie subcommittee in support of tightened federal standards for controlling motor vehicle air pollution in order to preserve community health, even at the cost of jobs. In direct opposition to the auto industry, which stubbornly resisted further vehicular emission controls, she declared that the union favored this cleanup despite possible adverse impacts on employment. According to her reasoning, auto workers were "first and foremost American citizens and consumers" who had "to breathe the same air and drink and bathe in the same water" as other Americans. "Despite the fact that they work in the automobile industry, neither they nor their children develop any immunity to automobile exhaust pollutants or any other pollutants." Madar then explained her union's commitment to a cleaner environment in practical terms. She noted the UAW's long struggle to gain better conditions in the plants, but explained that "we make little progress when we find that the gains in better health are negated when the worker leaves the plant and finds his community's living environment polluted." She promised that the union would pursue the fight for cleaner, more healthful communities "with the same vigor and tenacity" that it had devoted to cleaning up the immediate working environment.17

Madar offered a brief, sophisticated discussion of the interlocking social factors that contributed to America's environmental problems—the postwar population explosion, urban sprawl and blight, unprecedented affluence, consumerism,
and mobility—and their fundamentally nonlocal, interstate and nationwide character, again challenging industry’s localist argument. She showed an environmentalist’s sense of alarm, as well as a familiarity with early postwar environmental and ecological literature, when she charged that the deterioration of the nation’s environment was “not only a national problem, but also a national disgrace” and warned of “an air and water pollution problem of such magnitude that it has caused some of our leading social thinkers and scientists to conclude that we are in the midst of a struggle of life and death.” For Madar, the environment was not merely a rich person’s plaything, as anti-environmental rhetoricians often portrayed it, but a deadly serious issue of concern to all Americans, including working people.18

Reuther also grew more strident as the 1960s progressed. In 1968, speaking before the annual conference of the Water Pollution Control Federation, the UAW president argued that the nation’s environmental crisis was really the result of “a crisis in our value system,” of priorities “out of focus.” Reuther espoused not merely an environmentalist position, but a radical environmentalist position far in advance of most of the American public. Directly linking the environment with other social problems of the day, Reuther offered his audience an apocalyptic vision: “If we continue to destroy our living environment by polluting our streams and poisoning our air . . . we put the survival of the human family in jeopardy. . . . We may be the first civilization in the history of man that will have suffocated and been strangled in the waste of its material affluence—compounded by social indifference and social neglect.” In keeping with these sentiments, the UAW sent representatives the following year to argue strongly in favor of proposals for a new National Environmental Policy Act and a federal Council on Environmental Quality, and it supported legislation to promote recycling and the proper disposal of the nation’s growing volume of hazardous wastes.19

The UAW soon found allies in its environmentalist crusade. By 1970, representatives of OCAW and the Steelworkers were testifying before Congress that pollution control was necessary even if it reduced employment in their industries. Anthony Mazzocchi, OCAW’s citizenship-legislative director and later vice-president, also testified in favor of a National Environmental Policy Act. Like Reuther, he clearly feared an environmental apocalypse which made ordinary economism pale by comparison. No loose cannon, Mazzocchi was a responsible official of a major industrial union with a considerable personal following who helped establish a substantial record of environmentally progressive achievements for his union. In his written statement, he sounded an alarm about the nation’s environmental situation, and noted with profound suspicion the role of corporate America in creating this situation. His workers’ experience with many of the most dangerous and terribly polluting industries in the nation had led them to believe that “the hour for mankind is far later than anyone knows.” Echoing Madar, Mazzocchi advocated immediate regulatory action, even though the result might prove economically harmful to union members.20
Some officials of the United Steelworkers came to the same conclusion. In 1970, Joseph Germano, director of District 31 (Chicago-Calumet-Gary), appeared before the Muskie subcommittee to support increased federal air pollution control efforts in terms that echoed Olga Madar: “We felt we weren’t around just for the purpose of negotiating wages, hours and working conditions, but we must concern ourselves with the affairs of not only our members but the people in the community.” Germano noted that union members in Peoria, in a surprising reversal of traditional assumptions, had threatened to strike on account of the terribly polluted conditions outside the local steel mill. He described air pollution cleanup as a matter of life and death, explaining that “if it is necessary to lose 300 or 400 jobs to save the lives of 3,000 or 4,000 people, then that is what is going to happen.” Germano supported this position with a telling anecdote. After he had requested Chicago city officials to grant leniency to the Republic Steel plant in South Chicago while the company converted its manufacturing process, local members of the United Steelworkers blasted him for seeking a compromise on pollution control, even though their jobs were on the line in any partial shutdown. Germano’s statement showed not only a high level of environmentalist sentiment in District 31, but also implied that the rank and file were ahead of the leadership.

As some of the nation’s most important industrial unions made pro-environmental pronouncements, the nation’s largest agricultural union conducted its celebrated campaign against the irresponsible use of crop pesticides. Led by Cesar Chávez, the United Farmworkers continued the work of Rachel Carson in exposing the dangers of modern agricultural pesticides and calling for needed reforms during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The UFW campaign against pesticides primarily sought safe working conditions for farm laborers, who suffered severely from sickness, injury, and even death from handling dangerous substances without proper safeguards. In this regard, it remained largely a traditional struggle for improved worker health and safety in the workplace. But thanks to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the use of pesticides had become one of the most celebrated environmental issues in the United States, and the UFW expanded its brief against them to include wider considerations of community health, and in the process it gained sympathy and support from other concerned groups.

The UFW’s pesticide campaign first gained public attention in 1968, after the fatal poisoning of a sixteen-year-old ordered to spray strawberries under grossly improper and unsafe conditions. Chávez warned California agribusiness interests early in 1969 that workers would not allow themselves to be poisoned. UFW chief counsel Jerome Cohen initiated legal action to force the Kern County Agriculture Commission, based in California’s conservative and heavily agricultural Central Valley, to divulge records of commercial pesticide applicators in order to substantiate claims of sickness and injury by farm workers, but this challenge met resistance from overtly partisan, pro-agribusiness attitudes and actions on the part of local authorities. Later, during 1969 congressional hearings on the problems of migratory labor, Cohen charged the California table grape industry with chronic, gross irresponsibility in its use of pesticides “in disregard of the
health of both the consumer and the workers," and he offered further horror stories of afflicted workers. For his part, Chávez presented evidence of potentially dangerous pesticide residues on grapes purchased at supermarkets, noted episodes of pesticide poisoning among farmworkers over the past seven years, and charged both California and federal agricultural agencies with neglecting their responsibility to protect field workers and consumers. In this way, the United Farmworkers, while focusing mainly on labor issues rather than strictly ecological or environmental ones, worked in common cause with environmentalists by publicizing a major environmental problem and providing a stirring example of resistance to environmental degradation in the face of heavy odds.

While never as radical in its pronouncements as some of the more progressive unions, the AFL-CIO followed the general trend toward a greater sense of concern and urgency about the environment. In 1970, an AFL-CIO representative declared before Congress that air pollution in America was "not only a massive cause of economic, ecological, and other damage, but a growing menace to public health . . . [that] threatens the continuation of human life and the lives of most living creatures on this planet." In two environmentalist resolutions from the previous year's national convention, the Federation proclaimed that the "internal combustion motor vehicle is the nation's greatest threat to its precious and irreplaceable air resource," condemned U.S. auto makers for their continual efforts to obstruct the development of pollution control devices, and called for immediate federal action on air pollution and other environmental issues, warning how the "limits of the American people's tolerance for foot-dragging by government . . . and private industry are being reached." Such statements, especially from the usually conservative AFL-CIO, demonstrated the degree of distance between unions and employers on environmental issues by 1970.

Rank-and-file members often joined union leaders in expressing alarm over the state of the environment. At field hearings of the Muskie subcommittee in St. Louis in 1969, James Pace, community action director for Teamsters Local 688, organized a delegation of workers and their families to testify on the severe local air pollution problem and to demand immediate federal action. Rejecting industry calls for a local solution, teamster Richard King pointed out the interstate character of the problem: "I am tired of seeing through burning eyes and breathing acid air from the Illinois side as well as the Missouri side." Milton Barlow, chief shop steward at the St. Joe Lead Company's plant in Herculaneum, Missouri, reported with disgust how his company tricked air pollution control inspectors and how he believed that the situation would never change without pressure from the federal government. Martha Blacksher, a schoolteacher and wife of a teamster from Madison, Illinois, told of the sufferings of her asthmatic son at the hands of nearby industry. On many days, atmospheric smoke and dust was so severe that if she allowed the boy to play outside, he would face a serious asthma attack requiring extensive medical attention. Doctors recommended that the family relocate to a cleaner, healthier climate, but this was impossible because the Blakshers had little money and needed to stay close to sources of employment. Her testimony powerfully illustrated how air pollution traditionally
hit working-class citizens harder. As residents of less desirable neighborhoods near industrial districts with the most severe problems, they had limited options for escaping their environment.44

For the same event, Kenneth L. Worley, director of Region 5 of the United Auto Workers, prepared an impassioned letter on behalf of the Greater St. Louis Council of the UAW. What was the use, he wondered, of worrying about wages, contracts, medical insurance, civil rights, nuclear disarmament, moon exploration, or ending the Vietnam War “if we continue to poison and destroy the life supports of the world?” His statement read like a radical-environmentalist jeremiad:

Better we tear the factories to the ground, abandon the mines, plug the petroleum holes and fill the fuel tanks of our cars with sugar than continue this doomsday madness . . . We demand that uncompromising and irreversible standards and controls be established to preserve our environment, no matter what the cost, no matter how great the violation of property rights, no matter what the effect on dividends and no matter what the effect on our own bold plans for collective bargaining.

While James Pace and Kenneth Worley may not have been typical of ordinary working people, their actions demonstrated the growing environmentalism of some local labor organizations and individual workers over the course of the late 1960s.45

On the national front, the UAW continued to lead the way in environmentalist innovation. In January 1970, just a few months before his untimely death in a plane crash, Walter Reuther held a press conference where he announced a new concept in labor-management negotiations: “I think the environmental crisis has reached such catastrophic proportions that . . . the labor movement is now obligated to raise this question at the bargaining table in any industry that is in a measurable way contributing to man’s deteriorating living environment.” Reuther promised that his union would do just that. During negotiations with employers in 1970, UAW locals made nearly 750 environmental protection demands, mostly concerning pollution at the workplace, but also including wider environmental issues; clearly, at least some locals and ordinary workers shared the national leadership’s environmentalist enthusiasm. The union also sponsored the nation’s first environmental teach-in, at the University of Michigan, two months before the first Earth Day celebration on April 22, 1970.46

In a surprise move, the UAW joined several environmentalist organizations three months later in calling for the replacement of the internal combustion engine. Together with the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the National Audubon Society, and newer and more radical environmental organizations such as Environmental Action, Friends of the Earth, and Zero Population Growth, the UAW submitted a joint letter to Congress calling for “air pollution control standards so tough they would banish the internal combustion engine from autos within the next five years” to “guarantee every American a safer, cleaner at-
mosphere by 1975.” They derided an air pollution control bill that had recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives as “pitifully weak” and found alternative proposals from Senator Muskie and the Nixon administration to be less than “the minimum provisions acceptable.” The various environmental allies advocated use of modern steam engine technology. Contrary to claims of the major American auto makers, they argued that this engine was already feasible and had lower emissions than the internal combustion engine could ever hope to achieve. They also called for government and private vehicle fleets to use only unleaded gasoline after 1971, for auto makers to guarantee air pollution control devices for 50,000 miles and to install these devices on used cars at no cost, for random federal testing of all makes of cars for air pollution compliance on the assembly line and on the street, and for more stringent standards and penalties for industrial polluters.  

Later that same month, UAW leaders further formalized their alliance with environmentalists. A follow-up meeting to plan strategy after the first Earth Day, arranged by Environmental Action and hosted by the United Auto Workers at their Family Education Center at Black Lake, Michigan, brought together some 250 students, environmentalists, community organizers, and labor leaders from the Alliance for Labor Action, the Teamsters Union, OCAW, and the UAW to discuss air pollution and other environmental topics requiring action. While unionists paid particular attention to mobilizing support for an Occupational Safety and Health Act, the New York Times reported that sessions also focused on various pollution problems, legal actions against polluting industries, electoral politics, “the relation of the environmental movement to the urban poor,” and other “wide-ranging and informal discussions of technical information, past efforts and possible tactics.” Environmentalists were enthusiastic about a campaign for “auto free zones” in cities as part of their battle against the internal combustion engine, and UAW officials claimed their union was pressuring auto manufacturers to convert part of their production to “new means of mass transport.” Participants also discussed efforts to “make industry reduce pollution through proxy fights in stockholders’ meetings,” a technique pioneered in Chicago by the Campaign Against Pollution, a group led by veteran civil rights crusader Saul Alinsky.  

The first Black Lake Conference reflected the growing radicalism of younger participants in the environmental movement around 1970, and their increasing disillusionment with working for change within the existing political system. As with so many reform issues, politicians often mouthed the right platitudes about the environment until they were elected and then largely forgot their promises. But Victor Reuther, brother of the late union president, injected a note of optimism in a speech that received a standing ovation from conference participants. He called for close cooperation between environmental activists and trade unionists and urged the impatient young environmentalists to follow the trade union movement’s example by selecting specific, attainable goals on which to focus their efforts. In language that would seem anachronistic only a decade later, when workers were presumed to have little in common with students or environ-
When major industrial unions such as the UAW, the United Steelworkers, and the International Association of Machinists helped pass the major Clean Air Act amendments of 1970 and the Clean Water Act amendments of 1972, and when environmental organizations helped pass the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, the outlook for further cooperation between young environmental radicals and union members seemed auspicious. It appeared that the labor movement and the environmental movement might march into the future arm-in-arm, fulfilling Walter Reuther’s dream of a broad-based and far-reaching environmental movement that encompassed all classes and included social, ecological, aesthetic, and resource-conservation issues.39

Although conflicts occasionally arose within this alliance, major segments of organized labor, or at least its leadership, remained generally pro-environmental until economic conditions deteriorated during the mid-to-late 1970s. Events increasingly exposed the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the nation’s energy-intensive and extravagant economy and demonstrated that environmental preservation did not come without costs. Workers grew less rebellious as they were sharply reminded about their tight connection to economic cycles. Union environmentalism had been rooted in assumptions of continued economic expansion, job security, and relatively easy prosperity; many people believed that environmental cleanup and protection could be achieved without major economic dislocations or fundamental changes in the suburbanized, auto-based, consumeristic postwar American culture. But with skyrocketing energy costs, general inflation, and economic stagnation, workers who had once anticipated an improving standard of living and a shorter work week now increasingly worried about keeping their jobs at all. At the same time, some environmentalists, following their new-found ecological awareness to more radical conclusions, questioned the desirability of economic growth and even advocated zero-growth policies, which helped to further alienate workers.30

In the face of such changes, dislocations, and worries, working Americans during the 1970s grew increasingly receptive to the industry-promoted argument that the nation could not afford the luxury of environmentalism. Rejecting the vision of Walter Reuther, who saw environmental quality as inextricably linked to other socioeconomic conditions and a necessary and legitimate goal in working people’s march toward progress, many workers and labor leaders in the 1970s detached the environment from other, more traditional union concerns. As part of America’s general turn away from the bold reformist visions and freewheeling sociocultural experimentation of the 1960s, unions often joined industrial management in condemning environmental regulations as an economic burden and a threat to jobs. Deteriorating economic conditions also made union members much more susceptible to environmental “job blackmail”—threats that industries would close plants because they could not afford the costs imposed by new environmental standards. To keep jobs, workers would have to join management in resisting such new requirements and make other concessions about wages and working condi-
tions. Statistically, such claims usually proved false, and the negative economic effects of environmental regulation have long been highly, and often disingenuously, overrated by industrial interests and their allies. While unionists and environmentalists still cooperated on certain issues, such as worker health and toxic substance control laws, workers grew increasingly suspicious of environmentalists, which fueled the myth that organized labor and the environmental movement were inevitably opposed to one another. 1

Ironically, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 gradually pushed unions back toward their erstwhile allies. The Reagan administration worked overtime to break the strength of organized labor and systematically refused to enforce occupational safety and health laws. In the unrestrained, probusiness climate of the 1980s, many employers rewarded workers' loyalty and frequent anti-environmental cooperation with layoffs, often shipping factories and jobs overseas to take advantage of generally nonunion labor in Third World nations devoid of meaningful occupational health standards or environmental controls. This process culminated in the battle against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, which found labor and many environmentalists allied once again. 2 While they failed to derail NAFTA, the struggle may have led both movements to reflect momentarily on the vision of Walter Reuthe and other early labor environmentalists.

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Notes

This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association-Pacific Coast Branch in August 1995. I would like to thank the two commentators on that panel, Mari Jo Buhle and Daniel Letwin, as well as the anonymous reviewers for Environmental History.


2. Buttel, Geisler, and Wiswall, 4; Hays, 304; Kazis and Grossman, x; Heinrich Siegman, The Conflicts Between Labor and Environmentalism in the Federal Republic of
3. Buttel, Geisler, and Wiswall, 4; Hays, 304; Kazis and Grossman, x; Siegman, 23; James C. Oldham, “Organized Labor, the Environment, and the Taft-Hartley Act,” Michigan Law Review 71 (April 1973): 935–1040. The conclusion that mainstream labor history generally ignores early labor environmentalism is based on a search of electronic databases, as well as a survey of some forty major books on the AFL-CIO, on major unions such as the United Auto Workers, and on American labor in general published between 1970 and 1995. These works make virtually no mention of the environment, environmentalists, pollution, wilderness preservation, outdoor recreation, or any other evidence of labor environmentalism or anti-environmentalism during the postwar period. No recent articles address the subject either, although some scholars have apparently turned their attention to this neglected topic. Those books that do mention early labor environmentalism are the exceptions that prove the rule. See, for example, Nelson Lichtenstein, The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 437.


Industry representatives typically denied or minimized the risks from environmental pollution and invariably warned about economic dangers from instituting costly pollution controls. Typical industry testimony, since it could not appear to favor air or water pollution, instead called for further studies before action could be taken and urged that responsibility for pollution control remain at the state or local level (rather than the federal level, where such problems might actually be dealt with at industry’s expense). Almost any statement by representatives of the National Association of Manufacturers made at hearings on air or water pollution during the 1950s and 1960s would reveal this line of argument.

5. New York Times, 31 October 1948, 1; 1 November 1948, 1; 3 November 1948, 37; 14 October 1949, 29; Howard R. Lewis, With Every Breath You Take: The Poisons of Air Pollution: How They Are Injuring Our Health, and What We Must Do About Them


14. House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Public Lands of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs*, 85th Cong., 2d sess., 1958, 151–58; House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Public Lands of the Commit-


16. Olga M. Madar, “UAW Structure Emphasizes Recreation,” 31; House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, Nationwide Trails System: Hearings before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 1967, 156–58, 160–65. Olga Madar was the first female vice president in the UAW and one of the few women in any major union to assume a major leadership position prior to the 1970s.


18. Ibid., 536–38.


25. Ibid., 162–63.
31. Buttel, Geisler, and Wiswall, 1–2, 4–9; Kazis and Grossman, 17–22, 244–47; Oldham, 936–41; Siegman, 23–34; Hays, 298–307. For a brief description of several related problems (the aging and growing conservatism of union leaders during the 1960s, changes in the labor force, declines in union membership relative to the total workforce, and the increasing militancy of black workers and younger workers), see Abraham L. Gitlow, “The Trade Union Prospect in the Coming Decade,” *Labor Law Journal* 21 (March 1970): 131–58. For an example of how local union members could reject the international leadership’s environmentalist efforts, see Oldham, 940–41, nn. 14, 15; Buttel, Geisler, and Wiswall, 1–2, 4, 6–7; Kazis and Grossman, ix–xi, 3–39.