

## Our Children's Alberta: Fighting for Jobs and the Environment

### INTRODUCTION

We are leaving the world to our children. In a few years, the earth will be theirs to run. It is our choice whether to leave them a pristine, vibrant place where economic security and a high quality of life are abundant, or to hand them a grey, troubled land where nature is compromised and economies are harsh and barren.

While that sentiment may seem dramatic, it serves to remind us the decisions we make today will have consequences for our future. It also reminds us that we have the power and the ability to affect what choices are made.

Protecting the environment is an issue of public policy and of economic will. Decisions concerning the environment will be made in the upcoming generation. Whether those decisions benefit our children depends in part on our participation. Our unique perspective must be a part of any decisions that are made.

Workers' best interests lie in establishing a long-term balance of economic well-being and environmental protection. The self-interest of business is more shortsighted, leading to environmental degradation.

This policy paper is intended as a beginning. It is the beginning of a discussion among unionists about how we can best further the environmental debate and about what realistic, positive steps we must take as union activists to assist in protecting our environment.

The range of environmental issues needing attention is extensive, too extensive for a single policy paper. This paper does not suggest AFL positions on specific environmental issues, such as pollution or water quality. Instead, it sets a broad focus for the AFL perspective on environmental issues, and establishes a plan for future action.

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*“As the people who have the most to gain from improved environmental quality and the most to lose from insensitive changes that offer up their jobs as sacrifices to the cause of a cleaner environment, our union is well placed to play a key role in the movement for environmental reform and sustainable growth.”*

- USWA Canadian  
Environment Policy Paper,  
1989

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ALBERTA FEDERATION  
OF LABOUR  
COMMITMENT TO THE  
ENVIRONMENT

*The AFL is committed to:*

- ♦ *making a positive contribution to protect our environment. Poor environmental decisions harm workers and their communities.*
  - ♦ *bringing the perspective of workers to discussion of environmental issues. It is our job and our responsibility to ensure that the short and long term interests of workers and their families are protected.*
  - ♦ *participating in the search for environmental solutions. As an organization with a provincial mandate, we will focus on local and provincial solutions while continuing to support those working on national and global solutions.*
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## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES

We know that human activity inevitably leaves a mark on the earth. We also know that during the past 100 years, our “mark” has grown significantly, which can be seen clearly in the increase in environmental problems, from pollution to endangered species to global warming.

Before we can begin building our options for environmental policy, we must first understand more clearly the environmental problems our “mark” creates. Environmental concerns fall into four categories.

### 1. POLLUTION

Most pollution comes from waste material of human activity. Exhaust from cars, effluent from factories and mills, residues of pesticides and herbicides remain in the soil, air and water.

For example, acid rain is caused by sulphur dioxide released from coal and oil-fired generating stations and smelters. The sulphur dioxide mixes with water to become sulphuric acid and falls back to earth as acid rain (or acid snow). The acid kills fish and plant life.

Our water systems are also polluted through pesticides, effluent release, and other chemicals. These substances flow into our rivers and lakes, damaging life in the water and making the water less safe to drink. A comprehensive study of the rivers in Northern Alberta shows that ecosystems dependent on those rivers are being measurably affected and human activity is part of the cause. Even natural waste, such as animal manure, when deposited in high quantities can pose health and environmental problems. Water quality in southern Alberta has been greatly compromised due to clusters of large “hog farms” and feedlots in the area.

There is also smog, which comes from industrial and transportation exhaust. While vehicles and industrial sites are emitting less carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide and volatile organic compounds (the substances that create smog) and the increase in the number of cars and industrial sites means air pollution continues as a problem in our cities.

We should also not forget noise and aesthetic pollution. The sounds, sights and smells of our activity can be a detriment to our quality of life and can damage our health.

## 2. ATMOSPHERIC DEGRADATION

Our activities are also having a global effect on the earth's atmosphere. In many ways, global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer – the two forms of atmosphere degradation – are the most difficult environmental issues to solve.

Chloroflourocarbons (CFCs) are depleting the ozone layer. CFCs come mainly from air conditioners, aerosol cans and styrofoam. The ozone layer serves as our filter for dangerous ultraviolet rays which cause eye damage, sunburns and skin cancer. As it thins, our natural protection against these rays depletes, causing an increase in health risk. That is why the sun seems to burn more today than it did when we were kids.

The use of CFCs has been banned in North America, but older machines and leftover products continue to release CFCs.

The most controversial environmental issue is global warming, sometimes called the greenhouse effect. Some continue to dispute the existence of a slow warming of the earth's atmosphere, but most scientific evidence points to a clear trend. Since 1900, the earth's average temperature has climbed almost one degree celcius and another 4 to 8 degree increase is predicted for the next century.

The rise in temperature is due to increased carbon dioxide in the air, which traps heat, much like the glass in a greenhouse. The carbon dioxide comes from the burning of oil, gas, coal and other hydrocarbons.

Some say this may help a cold climate like Alberta, but it won't. Global warming will cause increased drought conditions in southern Alberta and will create increased freak weather patterns, such as El Nino and tornadoes. Melting of polar ice caps will flood coastal areas and drought will leave other areas uninhabitable.

### 3. ENDANGERED SPECIES AND HABITATS

Reckless use of natural areas for economic or recreational activity places animals and plants at risk. Currently in Alberta, there are 28 animals and 339 plants on the endangered list. They are endangered because their habitat has been encroached upon, or their food supply has been unnaturally undermined.

It may seem that the loss of a species or a type of plant does not directly harm the earth or humans. But that is not the case. Loss of diversity works its way through the food chain, ultimately affecting even human health.

### 4. RESOURCE EXTRACTION

There are two kinds of resource extraction: non-renewable and renewable. Each one has its own challenges and effects. Both types can be harvested in a manner that is sensitive to environmental issues and capable of producing stable employment.

#### *Renewable Resources*

If managed appropriately, industries such as forestry and fishing have the capacity to maintain the resource indefinitely. Unfortunately, these re-growth processes take time.

Historically, renewable resource industries have operated in a fashion that depletes the resource and upsets the ecological balance of the area. There have been many changes in these sectors in recent years, and logging and fishing methods are changing rapidly, as witnessed by MacMillan Bloedel's decision to cease clearcutting.

The key issue is ensuring that harvesting occurs at a pace and in a manner that allows the natural processes of regeneration to keep up. We must also ensure that disruption of animals and habitats are minimized.

#### *Non-Renewable Resources*

In many ways, these are the most difficult industries to address environmentally, because the resources – oil, gas, coal, minerals, etc. – are not replaceable. We don't know how long they will last, but eventually – maybe hundreds of years from now – the resources will run out.

The use of these resources has also been implicated in global warming and other environmental concerns. The central dilemma is how to move carefully but steadily to

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*“IWA Canada commits to minimizing environmental risk and damage while carrying out forest activities.”*

*- IWA Canada Forest Policy, “The Forest is Our Future”*

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ensure we use non-renewable resources in the most prudent manner possible. We must also seek out alternative energy forms. A plan for non-renewable resources must balance our current need for energy with the limited quantity of the substance and the negative effects of its combustion.

## KEY QUESTION

The environmental problems laid out in the previous section seem very diverse with apparently little in common. Once we begin to look at the crux of each issue, we find they are actually linked. We realize the essential dilemma – the key question, if you will – is how do we ensure human activity does not unduly damage our planet and our future.

This key question was thoroughly addressed twelve years ago by a United Nations panel of world leaders. The Brundtland Commission, chaired by Norwegian Labour Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, conducted an in-depth examination of the state of the world’s environment and how humans were affecting it. Its final report, Our Common Future, creatively addressed the nature of the problem and how to solve it.

The Brundtland Commission coined the term “Sustainable Development”. This phrase has been much abused in the decade since, but its original meaning is still a valid guide for our efforts in environmental policy. It is their definition that opens this section.

The CLC, the USWA, CEP and other unions have adopted the Brundtland definition as their starting point in their environmental policies. It is clear the definition fits labour’s perspective on the environment.

The definition is useful to us because it does two things. First, it attempts to strike a balance. It recognizes that human economic activity must continue, and in fact is crucial to developing sustainability. “It is impossible to separate economic development issues from environmental issues; many forms of development erode the environmental resources upon which they must be based, and environmental degradation can undermine economic development.” (p. 3) Brundtland acknowledges we must continue to have economic growth to sustain our existence.

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### KEY QUESTION

*“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”*

- Brundtland Report  
(Our Common Future),  
page 43

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**ACTION:**

*The Alberta Federation of Labour adopt the Brundtland definition of “sustainable development” as its guide to addressing environmental issues.*

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Second, it reminds us that we must not steal from our future. If we damage a lake or deplete a resource today, it will not be available for future generations to use. Brundtland links environmental protection to our economic self-interest.

In essence, the Brundtland definition is not about outcomes, but about process. It designs a process for our decision-making. “Sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.” (p. 46)

Sustainable development is not just about the environment. It is also about a sustainable economy and a sustainable society as well. We must not stop advocating for a more equal, more just society. Poverty, unemployment, discrimination and social unrest all make human activity less sustainable. Reducing these ills must be part of the solution.

When addressing environmental issues as labour activists, we need not panic and fear that it means the end of our jobs. We must also not ignore realities and pay little attention to how we borrow from our children’s future. Looking at the key question tells us that the question is indeed answerable and that it will not mean an end to our livelihoods and lifestyles.

## **LABOUR’S PERSPECTIVE**

Many say the environment is a “new” issue and labour has been slow to react to it. What these people forget is that years ago, the labour movement took a leadership role on issues that are today called environmental issues . Labour activists have a long history of putting issues on the agenda that affect the environment.

Since the 1950s, some of the major gains in the control of pollution came from the actions of Canadian unions. Unions such as the IWA, CAW (UAW), the precursor unions to CEP and others pushed and worked with their employers to find ways to control and eliminate pollution. They made pollution a priority because it was affecting the health of the workers

at the workplace and it affected the air, land and water in the surrounding community.

Our record on environment issues extends to today. CUPE 474, which represents custodians in Edmonton public schools, set up a program to reduce waste, increase recycling and improve energy efficiency. They have also been working to replace dangerous cleaning agents with less noxious substitutes.

AUIPE is a vocal advocate for public parks and wilderness areas. They have been one of the most effective critics of the government's plan to privatize parks. Much of their argument is built on the effects privatization will have on wildlife and protection of natural areas.

Nationally, CEP, IWA and other unions directly involved in sensitive industries have established environment policies and action plans. They are committed to contributing in a positive fashion to the debate affecting their workplaces and their communities.

Our history and our current record on environmental issues demonstrate that the labour movement has a perspective on the environment that is both constructive and distinct.

Employers view environmental issues from the perspective of minimizing costs, maximizing profits and meeting as few requirements as legally necessary. Their decisions will be based upon the economic interests of the corporation. Hence, they will be willing to compromise essential environmental protections and cut corners on protections if they believe it is in their interest. They will reduce or eliminate jobs without consideration of the impact on the community.

Environmental activists, our potential allies on many issues, see their role as the guardians of the earth. They will fight hard to protect endangered areas and to limit environmental degradation. How the fight impacts working people will often fall low on their list of priorities.

Our perspective is one of both worker and community member. This dual role is how we can straddle the two concerns of economic welfare and environmental protection. We naturally want clean communities and undisturbed natural areas. It enhances our quality of life. Good jobs are also a part of our quality of life, and so we will advocate for reasonable alternatives.

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*"It is these values -- equality and the right to participate -- that must provide the foundation for worker environmentalism."*

- CEP Environment Paper, "Together Building Our Future"

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We are well-placed to navigate the delicate balance between jobs and the environment. We are the only ones with the motivation to strive for balance. The only way to protect our interests is to end the “jobs vs. environment” conflict and replace it with a “jobs and environment” approach.

The first step in asserting our perspective is to get involved. We need to do our own research, make our own analysis and come to our own conclusions – conclusions based upon our unique position in the debate.

### JUST TRANSITION

What happens if environmental concerns cause the closure of a plant? The company relocates elsewhere. Their profits continue unabated, and possibly grow if they move to a country with lax environmental laws. The government is not affected directly. They may face some short term political heat, but they can counter it with other political manoeuvres.

The only ones who pay the price are the people who used to work at the plant. And their families. This is an unfair and unjustifiable distribution of costs.

We cannot expect working people to advocate for their own demise. It is not reasonable to ask unions to take positions on environmental issues that mean widespread elimination of jobs. To make union activists allies in any environmental cause, they must be assured that they will not pay the highest price for protecting the environment.

To complete our perspective, we need to address the distribution of “who pays the price”. The labour movement needs to put the concept of “just transition” on the agenda. “Just Transition” means:

1. Preventing or minimizing job loss through smarter solutions, creative planning and economic will;
2. Short term income protection for displaced workers and their families;
3. Longer term support for workers to find alternative employment at similar standards of living;
4. Employers and government must take joint responsibility for funding the transition.

The most essential element is the financial and political commitment by government and employers. It would be their contribution to ensuring everyone shares in the cost

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#### ACTION:

*The AFL remember its rich history of environmental commitment and strive to move environmental debate beyond “jobs vs. environment” conflict to a more beneficial “jobs and environment” perspective.*

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of environmental protection.

But “just transition” will not work without realistic jobs to replace any that are lost. Shifting to minimum-wage service sector jobs is not consistent with the principle we are putting forward. To make this idea work, we need all the partners to work out an industrial jobs strategy. We need to have the capacity to create high quality jobs in the future.

Our first goal is to see just transition as public policy, introduced by government and led by government, industry and labour. However, some unions are moving ahead anyway. CEP has developed intelligent mechanisms for making just transition work.

The Steelworkers have put much of the idea into life with the Canadian Steel Trade Employment Congress (CSTEC). CSTEC is a joint partnership, funded by unions, steel employers and government to retrain and assist displaced workers in the steel industry. Early reviews are favourable.

“Just Transition” is an extension of our longstanding principles to fight for the best deal possible for our members. Our first effort is to prevent job loss. However, just as with an economic downturn or some other business factor, there are times when we recognize that some job loss is inevitable. Then our goal becomes shielding our members as much as practicable from the negative consequences of job loss.

## **PUTTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INTO ACTION**

When we look at the labour movement’s perspective on environmental issues, we begin to see how we can play a constructive role in the debate. Once we are clear on where we come from and what principles matter to us, we can move to the next step of putting our ideas into action.

There are a number of ways we can put our principles into action. They naturally divide into short- term and long-term strategies.

### **1. ASSERTING SHORT TERM SOLUTIONS**

There are things we can do immediately to address many environmental concerns. The labour movement’s first strategy must be to utilize to the greatest possible effect

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#### **ACTION:**

*The AFL defend the interests of working people to minimize job loss as its relates to the environment. When some job loss is unavoidable, the AFL will fight for a fully-funded, comprehensive plan ensuring a “just transition” for displaced workers.*

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**ACTION:**

*The AFL will push for a renewed government role in the enforcement and policing of environmental laws and regulations. The AFL will call for tougher penalties against corporations convicted of breaking environmental laws.*

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the solutions and alternatives that already exist. These solutions minimize disruption and play an effective role in making our activity more sustainable.

The most elemental solution is to push government to reclaim its responsibility for enforcement. We have a network of environmental rules and regulations that attempt to make industry cleaner and more environmentally responsible. By Canadian standards, Alberta's laws are not onerous or rigid, but if applied go some distance to providing a basic level of protection. However, the Conservative government has chosen to move to "self-regulation", where industry is empowered to police itself.

New processes and technology exist to make industry cleaner and less wasteful. Embarking on a plan to implement feasible alternatives can be very effective in addressing environmental problems. Polluting pulp mills can be retrofitted to release less effluent. Viable alternatives to clearcutting exist and are being adopted in B.C. Energy-efficiency technology is available to allow homes and workplaces to use less energy.

Many solutions exist but are not being used because of a lack of government will or because of cost decisions by business. Fitting scrubbers on stacks can be expensive. Fitting homes with more efficient furnaces and fixtures can make them more costly to build and buy.

We can no longer afford to avoid new initiatives, as they are proven methods for protecting jobs and minimizing environmental disruption. Alberta needs laws that penalize polluters more appropriately and encourage cleaner production.

## **2. PLANNING FOR TOMORROW**

Short-term solutions help, but do not address some of the more difficult and pressing issues related to environmental problems. Short-term solutions in isolation are not capable of moving Alberta to a more sustainable economy.

Labour is well acquainted with the separation of short-term fixes and long term solutions. For example, we fight for good unemployment programs and training programs, but we know the long term needs of workers lie in a longer term Industrial Jobs Strategy, which maps out the future of our economy and provides longer term security.

The same holds true for the environment. Longer term sustainability rests in developing a long-term plan.

Without a plan, working people are sure to be the losers in any decisions made. To prevent this labour MUST impress upon decision-makers the need to develop a new process, one that includes all affected parties.

Much like Brundtland's definition of sustainable development, our proposal addresses less the solutions and more the process for finding the solutions. No one knows what the plan should look like. But to ensure it is mutually beneficial, we must design a process that will create a well-thought-out plan.

The process must include:

**1. Equality among partners**

Business, labour, government and the public must be at the table as equals, sharing responsibility and power. This would be new for Alberta, a province where business expects to call the shots.

**2. Quality of Life as Highest Priority**

The partners need to come to the table with the same set of priorities. All need to agree that the key indicator of success and failure is how a decision affects Albertans' quality of life.

**3. Measure the "Human Footstep"**

We need to develop a way to measure our impact on the environment. Before decisions can be made, we need to know the effects of our actions.

**4. Move Into Growing Economic Areas**

We know our economy will change as we move toward sustainable development. We need to stay ahead of change to keep our economy thriving. We need to capitalize on change by being a leader in new economic activity.

**5. Every Decision Has a 25-year Game Plan**

Politicians think in 4-year cycles. Business people usually look at the next fiscal year or a couple years down the road. This needs to change. Every decision needs at least a 25-year horizon.

The success of the process will depend on two things: acknowledging the seriousness of environmental issues (not denying things must change); and not panicking into poor decisions.

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**ACTION:**

*The AFL will advocate for a program encouraging the use of environmentally-sound technology and processes. Individual Albertans should be provided financial incentives to upgrade household energy infrastructure and businesses encouraged to utilize better processes and technology.*

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**ACTION:**

*The AFL advocate for a long-term decision-making process that blends economic planning and environmental sustainability. The goal of the process is to ensure workers benefit from any economic and environmental change.*

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Through the process, we can develop economic plans for towns and industries in Alberta. By combining our economic planning with our environmental planning, we increase the chances to avoid the jobs vs. environment trap.

Some countries have already starting doing this. For example, Denmark has made itself a leader in wind generation technology. When economic trends shift toward alternative energy sources, Denmark will reap the benefits of their early start.

The ultimate goal of the process is to achieve a sounder balance of power between decision-makers. It means business and government will need to share authority with workers and community members.

The process will lead to long-needed controls on the market. Left on its own, the market will not adapt quickly enough to meet the challenges. The process will also need to achieve guarantees of job protection for workers. Without guarantees, workers will not accept the solutions.

The process also depends upon leadership from communities and workers. Communities need to take the lead in ensuring decisions meet community needs. Citizens, as consumers, must be prepared to reward sound environmental practices through their consumption patterns.

In summary, the process outlined above is a jump-start. Everyone knows that everyone has to take a role in changing how we do things. Everyone knows we share the responsibility. Getting everyone moving forward on the issue is the hard part. This process is designed to give everyone the power to match the responsibility and to prod all partners into some action.

## **AN AFL GUIDE TO ACTION**

It is important we put our energy in pushing for a long-term process to achieve change. But there are many other things we can do to make our unions and the AFL more environmentally sound.

We have an obligation to ensure that environment has a prominent place on our agenda, just as we give priority to

job security, health and safety and workers' rights. As environmental issues expand into workplaces and our overall economy, our jobs and rights will be affected. Our members must be in a position to respond responsibly and to protect our interests.

Many of the things we can do parallel what we do in other areas. It is a task of including environment in our day-to-day activities. This will start small, with modest initiatives, but every small step matters.

### **1. Educate Members**

Our members, just like most individuals, need more information about the environment and how our behaviour affects it. We need to offer practical, realistic ways they can make a positive contribution. We should share success stories from other unions and communities.

### **2. Lobbying**

The AFL's lobbying efforts should include an environmental analysis. This means two things. First, it means working on environmental issues that affect working people. Second, it means incorporating the environment in some of our broader lobbying efforts.

### **3. Developing Links**

As we do on other issues such as health care or social justice, we need to begin establishing links with those environmental groups willing to work with us and on our issues. However, our members are concerned about working with organizations who are not sensitive to the worker perspective. It is important the groups we work with understand our unique perspective. It is possible this can be achieved through a mutual Social Conscience Statement which both we and they can endorse as ground rules for cooperation.

### **4. Bargaining for the Environment**

Often unions work best when we bargain our rights into our collective agreements. Collective agreements have the power to affect change and are not susceptible to the whims of politics. There are a number of issues we can start bringing to the bargaining table:

- ♦ Right to Refuse to Pollute: Just as workers have the right to refuse dangerous work, they should have the right to refuse a task which would damage the environment

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#### **ACTION:**

*The AFL use this policy paper as a beginning for further work in environmental issues. The AFL Action Plan will attempt to put the environment on the agenda of union locals, communities and governments.*

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*“The conclusion has been that the effects on jobs and income of sustainable development are minimal ... Canada needs an industrial strategy to promote clean, high-tech manufacturing industries.”*

- CLC Policy Statement on the Environment

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- ♦ Whistleblower Protection: Workers who point out environmental violations should be protected from reprisal or punishment
- ♦ Joint Environment Committee: Either on its own or as part of the Health and Safety Committee, with the guarantee that no environmental action will be taken without consultation with the Joint Committee
- ♦ Full participation by union on audits, inspections and decision-making regarding environmental controls
- ♦ Lay-off Protection and Transition Fund. This does not replace our efforts to create a public policy of “just transition”, but addresses the immediate term.
- ♦ Worker environment education and training program.

#### 5. *Organizing Workers in “Green Jobs”*

The labour movement needs to stay ahead of economic change and ensure that jobs in new industries are good, well-paying union jobs. This means focussing on organizing workplaces and setting the standards for new industries.

#### 6. *Participate in CLC*

The AFL should increase its level of participation in CLC environment activities. We should be ensuring that CLC actions reflect the needs and priorities of Alberta.

#### 7. *Develop Policy*

This paper is a beginning. We need to develop more policies in a variety of environmental issues. The AFL should commit to working on new policy resolutions and papers reflecting our perspective on the environment.

All of the actions above begin with an understanding and a commitment. The understanding is that we have a role to play in environmental issues. The commitment is that we take responsibility to put it on our agenda. Our children need us to.

### CONCLUSION

Environmental change is not a luxury to be dabbled with once we have other economic necessities addressed. It is not a secondary matter to be dealt with after our bread and butter issues are settled. The environment is rapidly becoming a bread and butter issue for unions.

But neither does environmental change require a revolution. It does not mean wholesale, sweeping reconstruction of our communities. It means acknowledging the problem and then moving methodically to solving it.

The job of the labour movement is to move beyond those who chirp that nothing is wrong and those who preach that catastrophe is imminent. Positive, practical, effective solutions are possible. And it is the labour movement who is best placed to start putting those solutions forward.

There is work to do. We must begin by arranging our own house and educating ourselves about what needs to be done. Then we can begin working with others to implement ideas that will guard our environment and protect jobs at the same time.

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