

Over the past few decades it has become obvious that the foundation for quality human health is quality environmental health.

Decades ago, no one worried much about things like the substances coming from industrial smoke stacks, the toxins we dumped in landfills or rivers; or the depletion of natural habitat. For most of our forbearers, these were the prices to be paid for progress, which meant jobs. In fact, most people felt there was an unlimited supply of resources to be tapped for the creation of wealth. More wealth meant a better standard of living for everyone.



Few understood, let alone suggested, that our planet was a living organism that could only tolerate so much interference with its natural functions before it became sick and started dying. Few felt the need to sound the alarm that the activities we undertook in the name of progress were having a permanent negative impact on the world we inhabit. We could always jump in a car and drive to where the air was still fresh, the water was clear, and fish and wildlife were common. Even as environmental disasters brought the issue closer to home, we clung to the attitude that it was someone else's problem (i.e. business or government). Today we know differently.

We have come to understand that the sum of seemingly isolated environmental incidents could actually destroy the environmental basis of life on this planet

In the last half of the 1900's, the human's relationship with the planet that sustains us underwent a profound change. The watershed incident for this change came in 1987 when a UN committee chaired by Gro-Harlem Brundtland, the Labour Prime Minister of Norway released "***Our Common Future***". Often referred to as the "Brundtland Report", this document was the first to study the cumulative impact of environmental damage on the overall planet and to show that incidents of environmental damage could not be assessed in isolation. It also proposed that nations could not solve the problem of environmental degradation without addressing the problem of poverty.

Prosperity at any cost was a concept that became unacceptable.

The Brundtland Report advanced the concept of "sustainable development", that is, economic development that maintains the biological and ecological systems we rely on for our existence.

"Sustainable development" means the impacts of poisonous effluent or habitat destruction are assessed as part of the costs of the enterprise. Economic growth, profitability and job creation were not the sole criteria for new development. This does not mean that simply because there are environmental problems with a proposed new project that the development cannot go ahead. It does however mean that any development ***must*** address and as much as possible eliminate the adverse environmental effects from their plan.

It is a well-known fact that human activities are having a substantial environmental impact on a global scale.

Some examples include urban sprawl, excessive habitat loss, rising pollution levels from manufacturing, agriculture, mining, and oil and gas extraction, and deforestation. We already know many of these activities are directly linked to ongoing species declines or extinctions around the world. As a result, some concerns have been raised about the possibility of ecosystems collapsing.

"A nuclear reactor melts down in the Ukraine and suddenly it is unsafe to eat the cheese made in Europe." – Barbara Streisand

It is absolutely critical that we understand that nothing we do on this planet takes place in a vacuum. Everything and everyone is interconnected. There is no place to hide; and we cannot simply pass the problem to someone else. It is also just as important to remember that correcting the negative effects of human activity takes as long as inflicting them. We will not replenish ozone levels or reduce greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere by a few years of tighter limits. We will have to restructure the way do things.

Environmental protection is a trade union issue, because it is a human issue.

Environmental protection is not a "new" issue for unions. Since the 1950's unions like the Industrial Wood and Allied Workers (IAW, now Steelworkers Union), the Canadian Auto Workers (formerly UAW), CUPE, and the founding union of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union were working to promote ways to control and eliminate



pollution, as it affected the health of their members. Federal and provincial employees' unions have long advocated for preserving or expanding public parks and wilderness areas.

Unionism puts people before profit: environmentalism puts the environment before profit. These two approaches have some differences but they share a common thread: human health and wellness is undeniably entrenched in environmental health. This fact has led, and will continue to lead, labour activists and environmental activists to the same rally points.

We must be creative and innovative; and strive to insure a just transition to a more sustainable economy.

The tendency when responding to environmental problems is to seek a ban on the problem. Toxic substances – ban their use. Polluting factories – shut them down. Bury all smog producing cars and force people to take transit, or use a bike. Close down all golf courses because they use pesticides or cut down trees to construct them. Often it appears little thought is given to the impacts of these moves. And sometimes the solutions end up being worse than the original problem.

Trade unionists are used to this kind of thinking. Our employers are always trying to fix one problem with another. For this reason, labour must play a full part in environmental protection – our aim must be to adopt environmental values while ensuring the burden of change does not fall unduly on the backs of working people as opposed to corporations and consumers. It is workers who lose when "dirty" industries are shut down due to environmental problems

Unless unions are part of the process addressing environmental issues, their members' interests will not be at the table and may be compromised severely. Alternatively, union members may find their jobs defended by their employers instead of their union. With all of the other attacks on unions, it is unwise for us to be engaged in fights with concerned citizens who care about the world we live in. We cannot afford to have the struggle for a sustained, healthy environment defined by the phrase "jobs vs. the environment".

"Instead of denying the need for change as other interest groups have done, the CEP is working to manage the problem." – David Suzuki

"Just Transition" is not only morally justified, it is the basis upon which working people can embrace environmental change.

The conflict between the environment (or health and safety) and jobs is a false one. But workers must feel confident that their jobs or livelihoods are secure if they are to embrace the changes needed to protect the environment for future generations. Working people's best interests lie in establishing a balance of economic well-being and environmental protection. A policy of "just transition" provides a mechanism to achieve that balance. It is designed to create a buffer against public policy dislocating working families and their communities as



governments work toward a sustainable economy. At its heart, it insists no workers or communities are left behind by environmental and economic change. It also embraces full cost accounting in assessing and achieving a sustainable future.

Unionists see the environmental issues from the perspective of both worker and community member. We are ideally situated to promote a "jobs and the environment" agenda.

Sustainable development embraces 7 new paradigms that will force us to rethink the way we do things. They are:

- reviving growth
- changing the quality of growth
- meeting essential human needs for jobs, food, energy, water and sanitation
- ensuring a sustainable level of population
- conserving and enhancing the resource base
- reorienting technology and managing risk
- merging environmental economics in decision making.

The burning question that emerges from this new way of addressing issues is who will pay the price?



Working people will not calmly accept the elimination of their jobs, a fact some environmentalists need to learn. To this end they propose the concept of "just transition". It means: preventing or minimizing job loss through smarter solutions, creative planning and economic will; short term income

protection for displaced working families; long term support and training for workers to find alternative employment at similar standards of income; employers and government taking joint responsibility for funding the transition.

"...in the years since [the] Rio [Earth Summit], the flourishing anti-globalisation movement has recognised that land reform, women's rights, unjust trade relations and poverty are green issues. Social Justice is inseparable from environmental sustainability." – Jamie Swift, Walking the Union Walk

References and Links:

"Our Common Future", World Commission on the Environment and Development, Oxford University Press, 1987
David Suzuki, The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature, Greystone Books, 1997

"Our Children's World: Steelworkers and the Environment", Report of the USWA Task Force on Environment, August 1990. Available at www.uswa.com.

"Our Children's Alberta: Fighting for Jobs and the Environment", Policy Paper of the Alberta Federation of Labour, April 1999. Available at www.afl.org/publications-research/policy-papers.

"National Forest Policy for a Sustainable Economy" Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union, 2000. Available online at www.cep.ca.

**"CEP Energy Policy" Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union, 2002 Available online at www.cep.ca.
Jamie Swift, Walking the Union Walk, ???**

Links to environmental organisations in Alberta and Canada are available at www.aenweb.net, the web site of the Alberta Environmental Network.

Links to environmental information from other unions are available from the web site of the Alberta Federation of Labour at www.afl.org/environment.

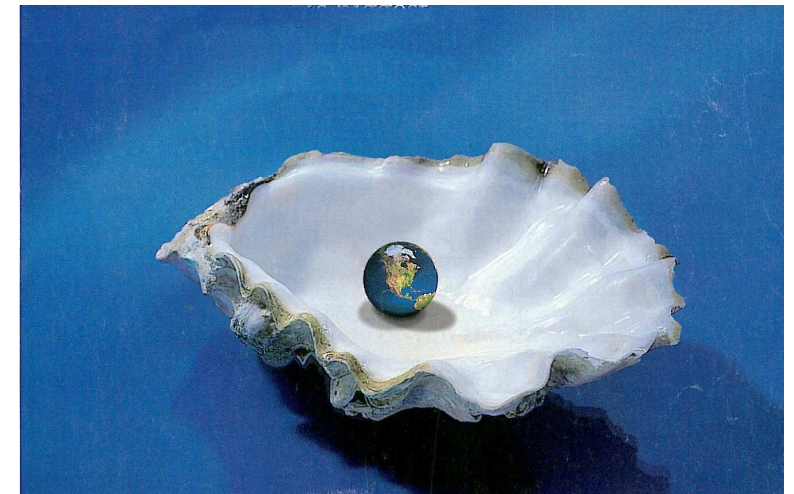
Further information about labour's position on environmental issues can be found at the web site of the Canadian Labour Congress www.clc-ctc.ca.

Test your own environmental impact by doing the test at www.myfootprint.org.

AFL Environment Committee

Why Environmental Protection is a Trade Union Issue

The environment is not something "out there". The environment is us: our lives, our work, our community, our country, our world.



Prepared by the AFL Environment Committee