

Environmental Action and Social Partnership in North America

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Presentation to the Round Table on the Cooperation and Role of the Social Partners in the Environment, 21-22 September 1994 Dublin Ireland

When people talk of social partners in the United States, more often people think of advertisements in personals columns than the joint efforts of trade unions and managers to positively address the social context. This is true generally¹ and even more so when it comes to the consideration of environmental issues. Despite the lack of framing that sees the issue within a social partner context, there is considerable activity in North America where labor and management, both together and separately, address environmental issues. In the United States, new ways of thinking about the environment are emerging within the corporate world and in trade unions that are bringing the two parties together more than ever before. The situation in Canada is somewhat different. A stronger labor movement and a tradition of community responsibility yield more developed social partner forums on the environment.

In this paper, I will primarily cover a series of developments in the US that have important implications for industrial relations and the environment in the years ahead. I will briefly review some activities in Canada as well.

North American Union Activity and Policy on the Environment

Only recently have American unions begun to turn their attention to the broader environmental questions despite some earlier efforts. During the energy crises of the 1970s, unions became involved in looking at alternative energy considerations though a deep chasm opened between those pro- and anti-nuclear power. Considerable study was done on the employment implications of new energy

¹ Lowell Turner, "Social Partnership: An Organizing Concept for Industrial Relations Reform", *Workplace Topics*, AFL-CIO Department of Economic Research, vol. 4., no. 1, June 1994.

patterns.² During this period, the Sheet Metal Workers Union pioneered work in solar energy and in concert with employers provided a guarantee for the installation of solar panels by union contractors. Despite these efforts, it can safely be said that current partnering activity is at a broader level than ever before and is growing. There is as yet no coordinated union effort on environmental issues nor any clear statement on US labor perspectives on environmental issues. Nor is there a distinct national policy in the US that elevates the role of social partnership by employers or the government. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has taken a more active role and has appointed an environmental coordinator. The CLC set up a national Environment Committee in 1987 and made it a standing committee in 1990. In November 1990, they organized a national environmental conference.³

Representing hundreds of thousands of environmental workers, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) has pursued an increasingly active role in environmental issues. Two national conferences have been held attracting hundreds of activists to plot out a strategy at the local and national level. William Lucy, Secretary-Treasurer of AFSCME says that the reasons for the conferences is "because we want to transform all the members of the union into environmental activists, AFSCME-style. We're not doing this because it's a nice thing to do or because it's politically correct. It is fundamental to protecting the jobs, the rights, and the health of members and the well-being of their communities."⁴ Environmental issues are a regular subject for discussion at the union's conventions. For example at their 1992 convention, the union declared, "AFSCME members are on the front lines of the struggle to achieve a clean and healthy environment in their workplace and in their communities" and went on to discuss the political, workplace and union challenges for an improved environment. Resolution 40 submitted by a very active environmental local in California states that "AFSCME shall encourage locals and councils to negotiate environmentally related issues into their contract language and will provide examples of this upon request." The resolution also stated that "AFSCME locals and councils can create environmental responsibility in their own offices as well as in their workplaces through contract language; and this can be accomplished by such means as forming joint union-management committees to pressure employers to apply an environmental ethic at the workplace."

² Richard Grossman and Gail Daneker, *Energy, Jobs and the Economy*, Boston, Mass: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1979.

³ Ted Schrecker, *Sustainable Development: Getting There from Here*, Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 1993. p. 15.

⁴ William Lucy, "AFSCME: The Environmental Union", *AFSCME Public Employee*, January 1994, p. 16. see also March/April 1994 issue for a report on the conferences.

For public sector workers, environmental action has both an altruistic and a practical dimension. Especially in debates on whether trash collection or other waste handling functions will be privatized, public sector workers are fighting to keep their jobs. To the degree that environmental protection is seen as a public trust then this is an easier task than simply fighting cost reduction pressures. There are significant health and safety issues for these public workers along with conditions of work questions including those triggered by Clean Air Act requirements on employee commuting in polluted areas.

The National Association of Letter Carriers(NALC) is acutely aware of the amount of waste paper that goes through the mails. A number of local branches have been involved in ways to recycle and reduce the amount of waste that comes through the postal service.⁵ In 1992, the US Postal Service claimed \$1 million of revenues from recycling. The NALC also highlights how their joint employee involvement activities have proposed new delivery vehicles that generate less air pollution through conversion to natural gas. In addition, the union provides tips to its members on greener lifestyle choices.

The Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union(OCAW) has had a long standing and direct interest in environmental issues. They have produced materials to help local and community understanding of these issues. Anthony Mazzochi, assistant president of OCAW, has long been an advocate of a Superfund for Workers that mirrors the principles of the Superfund that funds cleanup of toxic waste dumps. Mazzochi and others argue that workers' ill health and lost jobs are also the residue of polluting practices as much as reclaiming the groundwater and land and thus deserve compensation and assistance to maintain an income while learning new skills and transitioning to new jobs with similar earnings. OCAW has built coalitions with progressive environmental groups while pushing their employers to clean up their production processes and examine new products that are more benign to the environment such as substitutions for chlorine based processes. The OCAW has worked closely to develop Good Neighbor Agreements⁶ that bring the community into the plant for environmental monitoring and problemsolving.

The United Steelworkers Union has an extensive environmental program that was passed overwhelmingly at their Toronto conference in 1990. All Steelworker locals by convention action are mandated to have an environmental committee.

⁵ "From Undeliverable Trash to Recycling Cash, *Postal Record*, April 1993, pp. 18-25.

⁶ Sanford J. Lewis, *The Good Neighbor Handbook: A Community-based Strategy for Sustainable Development*, Waverly MA: Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1993.

These can be union only or can also be in a joint union-management setting. Their report stated: "We believe the greatest threat to our children's future may lie in the destruction of their environment. For that reason alone, environment must be an issue for our union. In addition, we cannot protect Steelworker jobs by ignoring environmental problems."⁷ They have addressed these issues broadly and their actions are coordinated through their Health, Safety and Environment Department. This department provides active consultation to locals, training sessions for staff and local unions, participation in joint forums with employers, and engagement at the policy level in the US and Canada.

"We care", declares the United Automobile Workers(UAW) about the environment. The UAW has long had a Conservation and Resource Development Department in the International Union office. This started from conservationist concerns of the many sportsmen in the union. However, it did then and does now have a broader environmental ethic as well. Walter Reuther, the visionary UAW leader, said in 1967: "Our members and their families are directly affected by the environment around them, whether inside the plant or outside the plant. The pollution of the air and of the water; the unwise waste of our natural resources are of concern to all of us."⁸ Over the last 25 years this has emerged into greater interest in environmental protection. The UAW has been a sponsor of Earth Day activities nationally and locally. In literature describing their program, the union says: "The UAW has long recognized the connection between the environment, the economy, and the quality of life of our members and their families. We continue to be committed to protecting and conserving the natural resources that we all depend on for survival, and we continue to promote the judicious use of nonrenewable energy sources." They strongly support the development of alternative fuels for automobiles to reduce greenhouse gases.

The Laborers International Union of North America is making a major push into the environmental arena. This includes hazardous waste and recycling activities along with exploration of more environmentally sound construction practices. Local 445 in Brooklyn New York is a recyclers local. They have developed school based programs working with their member's children "to inform kids about what recycling really is and the type of work their parents do. Members develop a sense of pride..." The National Training Center of the Laborers-Associated General Contractors(AGC) based in Pomfret, Connecticut has an environmental staff of 22 professionals who design and deliver training program

⁷ *Our Children's World: Steelworkers and the Environment: Report of the USWA Task Force on the Environment*, Pittsburgh PA: USWA, August 1990. p. 4.

⁸ Administrative letter establishing the UAW Conservation and Recreation Department, August 1, 1967.

for hazardous waste removal and other environmental programs. Funding comes from grants to the union and contractually based employer contributions. The training time is usually double the federally required minimum. Through use of modern instructional technology and hands on experience for members, employees in the industry are taught not only the safest but also the most efficient practices. The Laborers have set up a program to spread environmental training to Mexico and other Latin American countries and in Eastern Europe. The International Union of Operating Engineers has a similar commitment to training on hazardous waste removal and works with its contractors to take advantage of opportunities in this field.

In Canada, many unions are involved in environmental work. The Energy and Chemical Workers Union, now merged into the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers' Union of Canada has had extensive involvement in environmental issues. For example at Sask/Energy, SHE Committees are joint efforts to improve safety, health and the environment. They review all business processes to assure best practice.

Another example is the Canadian Auto Workers, especially Local 444 in Windsor, Ontario, which has built strong alliances with environmentalists. The national union's constitution requires that all locals have environment committees, "In 1991, Local 444 signed a two year contract with Environment Canada, as part of the federal government's Pollution Prevention Strategy, to promote a Toxics Reduction and Elimination Project whose objective was to educate both workers and management on ways and means of eliminating toxic chemical hazards in the workplace and the necessity of taking such action in terms of both human and eco-system health."⁹

Union environmental work is divided into two areas. In some cases, unions work with environmental groups and regulatory agencies to increase pressure on companies when there is a dispute. In other instances, unions work cooperatively with employers to advance an environmental agenda. Sometimes this cooperation is based on working to find new and better environmental solutions. And sometimes it is to jointly fight a rearguard action against outside environmental pressures. The second instance is labeled "greenmail" when jobs are perceived to be in jeopardy.

⁹ Schrecker, *op. cit.* p. 86.

Joint Labor-Management Committees at the Enterprise Level

Based on the spread of total quality environmental management and other new approaches to environmental management, a more collaborative and less “technocratic” approach to environmental action is being pursued. Built off a regulatory compliance model, most early environmental programs were technically based. However increasingly there is a recognition of the importance of employee engagement in environmental action.¹⁰ I conducted a study with colleagues at the University of Michigan in the early 1980s that compared employee participation in energy and natural resource conservation in the US and Japan.¹¹ It showed the significant impact of participation, especially in unionized facilities, on energy conservation efforts and other resource conservation approaches. The research documented that in each country employees made major contributions to the full range of operational and technological strategies for resource effectiveness. that this was sustained over a period of time and that these changes made significant ongoing contributions to bottom line performance.

Awareness of the need for the engagement of trade unions at the workplace is still in a rudimentary stage where the importance of employee involvement is only now being recognized. In the US, several developments are opening this issue in interesting ways for the future. The United Steelworkers of America have negotiated broad ranging contractually based partnership agreements with the large steel makers and organized it under a “New Directions” banner. One of the characteristics of the agreement is to make environmental discussions a mandatory issue as part of their partnership. For example, in the collective bargaining agreement at Inland Steel the purpose statement includes a commitment to “ensuring that the Company operates responsibly with respect to the environment”. The contract stipulates that “union members of the Joint Leadership Committee shall have joint decision-making authority with their Company counterparts over the effects of the Company decisions ... including any health, safety or environmental programs.” This is, however, a circumscribed

¹⁰ see Ernest Callenbach, *et. al*, *Eco Management: The Elmwood Guide to Ecological Auditing and Sustainable Business*, *Workplace Guide: Practical Action for the Environment*, The Harmony Foundation, Ottawa, Ontario: Harmony Foundation of Canada, 1991, Joel Makower, *The E Factor: The Bottom Line Approach to Environmentally Responsible Business*, New York, Times Books, 1993., and Patrick Carson and Julia Moulden, *Green is Gold, Business Talking to Business about the Environmental Revolution*, Toronto: Harper Business, 1991 as a few examples of current thinking that incorporates employee participation as a key part of environmental action.

¹¹ Hy Kornbluh, James Crowfoot and Edward Cohen-Rosenthal, “Worker participation in energy and natural resources conservation,” *International Labour Review*, vol. 124, no. 6, November-December, 1985. pp. 737-754.

right. At the end of the day, decisions can still be made unilaterally if the parties cannot come to an agreement. At USX, the largest steel company in the US, there is a top level labor-management committee dedicated to environmental issues. The union has also put forward in several locations the possibility of a tripartite committee that includes local environmental groups. This was successfully negotiated in the settlement of the Ravenswood Aluminum strike where environmental pressures played a major role in forcing a settlement. The committee is still in its early formative stages. According to the Steelworkers Union, in some companies where local unions put environmental issues on agenda the company objected strongly expecting the union only to run interference in the community and politically when a difficult environmental issue surfaced.

The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union has a few examples of use of contractual language to press on health and environmental issues. The premier case was in Northfield Minnesota at the Sheldahl Company over the elimination of methylene chloride. Their collective agreement states: "The labor-management committee will oversee efforts to control, reduce and to the extent feasible ultimately eliminate the use of methylene chloride." Written into the collective bargaining agreement is a commitment "to implement the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's reduction plan and the right for the company and union to meet with representatives of community and organizations" and interested local citizens to review the progress of the reduction/elimination plan. This has resulted in substitution of more environmentally friendly materials and retaining jobs.

In another case, the Canadian Auto Workers negotiated in 1991 with the Chrysler Corporation the establishment of a joint National Environmental Committee. Their mission is to "encourage Chrysler employee participation in all existing and future environmental, reduction, reuse, recycling and energy conservation programs adopted by Chrysler; develop and recommend proactive measures with a view to improving the environment through employee participation; develop and issue educational materials to employees and their families to inform and encourage participation at work and in the Community..."

The primary means for labor-management cooperation on environmental and energy issues in the US is indirect. It comes through the activities of employee involvement or worker participation programs. We are in the middle of research on the Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) that will give us more up to date data on the effect of participation on source reduction. However, there is anecdotal data available and the results of previous studies to confirm the positive effect of employee participation in general on environmental issues. Significant environmental changes probably also are a byproduct of joint health and safety committees but no data is available to confirm the extent or impact of this

contribution. The Steelworkers report some limited progress in formally expanding their agenda to health, safety and environment committees.

Joe Romm, a senior official in the Energy Department, has written an insightful new book titled *Lean and Clean*.¹² The book is about the role of social process in environmentally and energy sound practices at workplaces. He underlines the story of employee owned Republic Steel. "Of Republic's 5000 employees, roughly 4,000 are unionized. After the employee buyout, "We realized that we couldn't succeed with an adversarial relationship" between management and the union said Harold Kelly, a company vice president. In 1991, they put in place Project 80, a program to reduce costs \$80 million/year by encouraging employees to identify process changes that would eliminate waste. Employees identify an improvement, a management-union committee reviews it, workers develop and action plan and implement it....The single largest money-saving idea was for improving recycling of scrap steel which cut more than \$3.5 million off the budget. The environmental department has recycled more than 3000 steel drums. These are the 55-gallon drums in which Republic's chemicals are delivered. The company had been paying thousands of dollars to remove the drums and dispose of them. Then the environmental department realized that the steel drums could be recycled.... More efficient use of water has been another huge money-saver. One group of workers figured out a way to reduce water during the heat treating process....Water consumption has dropped 80%...." Romm identifies many more examples where employees have taken leadership to increase enterprise performance while reducing pollution.

Other examples can be found in great numbers from reports of achievements of various labor-management initiatives. For example, at Saturn Corporation which is co-managed with the UAW, they have received awards for environmental excellence and the partners actively work on environmental strategies together. Companies like Xerox with extensive partnerships have both an excellent environmental program and world-class labor relations strategies. These two complement each other. At Nestle in New York, unionized chocolate workers identified ways to turn toxic chocolate oils from a large disposal cost to a revenue through sales to a cosmetics firm. A Boston hotelier, the Lenox Hotel, reports how they worked cooperatively with their union to introduce green hotel practices. Usually these environmental improvements are not thought of in a separate category but are a regular and proud outcome of joint programs. In environmental programs such as 3M's Pollution Prevention Pays, the union role is not explicit but union members are also significant contributors to this excellent program.

¹² Joseph J. Romm, *Lean and Clean Management: How to Boost Profits and Productivity by reducing Pollution*, New York: Kodansha International, 1994.

There is also emerging a species of labor-management committees just on environmental issues. Sometimes these are incorporated into local joint health and safety committees. AFSCME Local 2428, representing workers at the East Bay Regional Park District in Northern California, negotiated in 1979 an Ecology Committee which initially focused on pest management and pesticide issues. The committee was broadened to include community representatives and has moved from being an adversarial issue between labor and management to a forum for cooperation on a wide range of common concerns including waste reduction, recycling, wildlife issues and alternative energy ideas.

Perhaps the most interesting joint labor-management committee in North America is found at Interfor-IWA-Canada in British Columbia where there is extensive environmental consultation, problemsolving and decisionmaking. The program is defined as part of their collective agreement. Their vision statement reads: "IWA-Canada, Interfor and its contractors set the standard for cooperative and environmentally responsible and safe practices in all forest product operations" The program includes joint environmental committees at the camp level in the forests, and jointly designed and operated education, training and auditing systems. They jointly develop communications mechanisms to share ideas among the various logging locations on how to improve practices in their direct work, with contractors and in conjunction with the local community. The contract specifies a four step dispute resolution process that protects workers who identify environmentally unsound practices with ultimate recourse to an arbitrator for final decision.

Conclusion

The current situation of industrial relations and social partnership in the US and to a lesser extent in Canada is one of engaging exceptions that hint at the possibility of broader, more conscious and systemic approaches that would truly involve managers and trade unions in a common pursuit of environmental well-being. Given the magnitude of the workplace's contribution to environmental problems, labor and management can be major partners in finding solutions.