

Keeping Our Common Ground Green

By Katie Lawson

The power of a joint labor-environmental movement is well illustrated in the seminal book on the subject, "The World is Burning," by Alex Shoumatoff. When the book was published in 1990, it helped raise consciousness about the relationship between labor and the environment. Shoumatoff writes about the labor-environmental movement in Brazil, and gives the synthesis of these two movements a martyr and a champion, Chico Mendes.

As head of the Brazilian Rubber Tappers Union, Chico Mendes sought to unify and educate the rubber tappers of the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil. Rubber tapping, the practice of removing rubber from the bark of trees, is a relatively sustainable and environmentally friendly occupation. Because rubber tapping requires live and healthy trees, the rainforest needs to be protected from deforestation. At that time, and unfortunately still today, the rainforest was being burned and cut down to build farms and infrastructure.

Mendes organized workers to protect the rainforest, which their livelihoods depended on. He also united them to fight for fair wages and labor practices. He envisioned a world where the poor rubber tappers were not at the mercy of their corrupt bosses. By unifying the environmental and labor movements, Mendes became a revolutionary leader and international icon. In fact, he would live and die for these causes. Tragically, Mendes was shot to death as he stepped into his backyard on the night of December 22, 1988. Two notoriously corrupt ranchers, Darcy Alves Pereira and Darli Alves, were sentenced to 19 years in prison for their part in the assassination. They killed Mendes because he protected the people and the rainforest that they sought to exploit.

Finding Common Ground

The connection between labor and the environment is rarely as direct as it was in the case of the Brazilian rubber tappers. Furthermore, labor unions and environmentalists have not always been strategic partners. Not only have they had trouble finding their common ground, they have even come into conflict with one another at times.

Often, the lack of cooperation between labor and environmentalists is due to a lack of communication. "We don't always know each other," said Tanya Tolchin, Senior Washington Representative of the Sierra Club. "We need to get to know one another to learn about each other's priorities."

Unions can play an important role in educating their members about environmental problems and in advocating for sustainable living in local communities. Many unions have already started to green the labor movement. Farming and agricultural unions are working to reduce pesticide use, which is not only bad for the soil and water, but, according to a 2007 Worldwatch Institute report, also results in the deaths of about 40,000 workers annually. Pesticide use in growing food products is also unhealthy for consumers.

Paul Robinson, Research Director for the Southwest Research and Information Center (SRIC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has often worked with labor unions on environmental issues. "Working in alliances and coalitions and networks is challenging," he said. Robinson also knows it can be rewarding. He said that the way to build cooperation is through "sustained communication," which can lead to success. One example of this was when the SRIC helped union members receive compensation for radiation exposure.

Greening an Urban Setting

In New York City, the environmental approach of unions has to be adapted to fit an urban setting. In order to get local city unions involved, "you have to have a concrete program," said Sean Sweeney, Director of the Cornell Global Labor Institute. "The Service Employees International Union, for example, is trying to get their members to reduce their carbon footprint." One way is by fighting for building cleaners, members of SEIU Local 32 BJ, to work day shifts instead of night shifts. Not only are these hours more convenient for most workers, they eliminate the need for lights and appliances which consume energy all night.

Local 32 BJ, the largest building service Local in the country, provides training to its members on green building and green building maintenance. They hold classes which include training about energy and water conservation and energy efficient heating and air conditioning.

International Efforts

Important steps are also being taken on a much larger scale. In March of 2007, the Cornell Global Labor Institute held an international meeting between unionists and environmentalists. The conference, titled, "A North American Labor Assembly on Climate Crisis: Building a Global Movement for Clean Energy" focused in part on building a stronger bond between the labor and environmental movements. This March, the first National Green Jobs Conference was held in Pittsburgh. Organized by the Blue-Green Alliance, a collaborative effort of the Sierra Club and United Steelworkers, the conference brought together unionists, environmentalists, green business leaders, and other allies from around the country. Their objective was to discuss the role of

their organizations in creating a more environmentally sustainable economy that also produces good jobs.

Creating Green Jobs

"Now that there is a national realization that global warming is happening, there's new interest in creating a green economy," Tolchin said. The push for a green economy has led to the development of aptly titled "green jobs." Green jobs include jobs in the sectors of renewable energy, energy efficiency, and organic agriculture, to name a few. Some of them are already union jobs. Tolchin said that as more positions of this type are created, there is "hope that they can be good union jobs."

Although green jobs may be a relatively new concept in America, it is not new in Brazil. Rubber tapping is a prime example of a green job. It is both economically and environmentally sustainable. On the other hand, the jobs that are created by knocking down the rainforest – usually farming and logging – are short term at best. Rainforest soil is not fertile enough to continually harvest crops, and once the trees are

gone, what's left to log? Rubber tapping, on the other hand, preserves the forest and creates jobs that can last generations. Because of strong leaders like Chico Mendes, they are also union jobs.

As Shoumatoff stated, "The American labor movement has not taken on an environmental dimension and they should because they are being subjected to environmental racism." Shoumatoff points to the "horrendous" environmental problems in the American Southwest, the same problems Robinson encounters on a daily basis, as an example of environmental racism. The factories there produce toxic waste, which is then deposited into the water, soil, and air, and becomes the burden of people in the local communities. "These are also the people that work in the factories. They get it!"

The Brazilian labor-environmental movement is a success story, according to Shoumatoff. "It continues to this day. The young people are very concerned." Shoumatoff said that Mendes "inspired a whole new wave of field biologists and ecologists," and that their environmental agenda is very much linked with labor movements. As Tanya Tolchin puts it, "When we work together, we're stronger."

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