

## **LABOUR AND THE ENVIRONMENT AT THE CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS – THE STORY OF THE CONVERGENCE**

*Dave Bennett*

National Director (Retired),  
Health, Safety and Environment,  
Canadian Labour Congress

---

### **GETTING INTO HEALTH AND SAFETY IN CANADA**

**W**hen I came to Canada from the UK in 1980, the labour movement was expanding, both in numbers and in nature. One such change was a huge increase in union staff and the ratio of staff to rank-and-file members. With the rise of political and social action, union leaders found that they needed far more personnel than organizing and service reps. They needed researchers, educators and staff to coordinate new and (then) relatively specialized functions such as health and safety, women's issues, human rights, social justice and political action. This often meant going outside the labour movement to recruit experienced or qualified people.

These moves were not always welcomed by labour, from the grass roots to the top leadership. Often, such outsiders were categorized as 'academics', alienated from the true union fraternity and not really a part of the movement. As someone who got a university degree before having to work for a living, I counted as an academic. We were members of the clique of 'union bureaucrats', so despised by the real academics, whose own place in the established social order was usually far more entrenched than we pseudo-academics. Now that about half of union members have some tertiary education and the specialized functions are part of the mainstream, we hear far less about academics, except from the true academics, for whom the labour movement is never what they want it to be.

Coming from England, there were many things to learn. Not least the Canadian industrial relations system, which was very different from that of the British Isles. In Britain, the industrial relations system was informal with collective agreements that were not legally binding, little arbitration, few limitations on who could be organized and few restrictions on the right to strike. In Canada, by contrast, governments had imposed a framework on industrial relations with, of course, legally binding collective agreements, restrictions on

organizing and industrial action, and draconian penalties for both unions and members who broke the rules.

Next, there was the whole culture of trade unionism - again rather different from the British. Even by British standards, my own union, the Fire Brigades' Union (FBU), was unusual. It had about 33,000 members. These included the retained (part-time) firefighters, the British equivalent of Canadian volunteers. The union also included some of the senior fire officers. So you had situations where officers had a disciplinary function, yet their policies could be criticized to their face in a union meeting. "Better have them in the tent pissing out, than outside pissing in".

The biggest difference was that the firefighters' union had no paid staff, only elected officers, a few secretaries and a part-time journalist to edit the union magazine. All the work was done by the grass roots rank-and-file and the elected union officers, regional and national, most of whom were also full-time firefighters. This direct democracy is easier to realize in a small union than in a large one. Though I detested the Stalinist leadership, the union organization on the fire stations was superb. The shop stewards held regular meetings to discuss issues and the tenor of life on the watches (shifts). They in turn reported to the branch (fire station) union officers. Union meetings were held on the fire stations and were exceptionally well-attended, bearing in mind that there was a captive audience of the firefighters on duty and it was not a great inconvenience for the day shift to stay at the workplace for the evening union meeting. I have no doubt that this union organization was a product of the Communist politics of the 1930s.

If the FBU was unusual in Britain, it was even more so when compared to Canada. One big difference was the ratio of staff to members, which was much higher in Canada. This was partly due to the need for servicing in a highly structured and legally-mandated industrial relations system and partly because of the need for specialized union services, mentioned earlier. On emigrating to Canada, I had to learn a whole new union culture, as well as a wholly different system of industrial relations and labour standards.

Finally, there was health and safety. In this area, there was less difference between Canada and Britain, since both had health and safety laws, regulations and codes of practice. In the US, the great promoters of health and safety were the COSH Committees (Committees on Occupational Safety and Health), community organizations with a greater or smaller number of union rank-and-file members. They were pressure groups which existed because of the union leadership's failure to take up health and safety. There was less of a need for COSH groups in Canada, but health and safety activists still had the reputation as shit-disturbers, bent on making trouble both for and within unions. One former Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President was reluctant to hire a health and safety staff representative on the curious grounds that health and safety was

a workplace issue. So there was no need for a national presence. I became the CLC Health and Safety representative in 1983, transferring from the Education Department.

By this time, all of the provinces and territories, as well as the federal government, had health and safety legislation and regulations. The first was Saskatchewan under the guiding hand of a government administrator, Bob Sass, the Associate Deputy Minister of Health. He developed a framework for health and safety in Canada, much of which was adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) through a basic health and safety convention in 1981. Essentially, the framework consisted of three health and safety workers' rights: the right to participate, in the form of joint union-management health and safety committees, the right to refuse unhealthy and unsafe work and the right to know about workplace hazards. This was supplemented by a series of legally binding health and safety standards, limiting or eliminating workplace hazards.

From this framework, health and safety progressed further. There was a temptation to see health and safety solely in terms of workers' rights at the expense of standards: you could have a workplace rich in rights but still full of serious hazards. This meant that we had to balance rights with standards. Nor did health and safety committees have any real power without a strong union in the workplace, so we had to articulate and press for a relationship between health and safety bargaining and the work of joint committees. All this built upon Bob Sass' work.

At the same time, the focus of health and safety was changing. Union action had started as a campaign against physical injury and death but it became clear that there was a much bigger, hidden problem of occupational disease, largely unrecognized and uncompensated. So unions developed a program for addressing occupational diseases in addition to physical injuries, for which the causes and the action needed were much clearer. This focus on workplace diseases was later taken up anew when environmental protection was added to the occupational health and safety agenda.

## **FROM HEALTH AND SAFETY TO ENVIRONMENT**

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Environment Committee began as a sub-committee of the Occupational Health and Safety Committee in 1989. We produced a ten-point program for the environment, which called for workers' environmental rights, a worker perspective on the environment, stressed the connections between health & safety and environmental protection, and advocated a strong federal authority over the environment. We are still advocating.

Where did the pressure come from? There were two rank-and-file sentiments, which were rather distinct from each other. One comprised those

who emphasized the connection between health & safety and the environment. The most obvious example was pollution: the pollutants that poison workers are also the toxins which erode community health outside the workplace and degrade the physical environment. The way that the CLC came to address the threefold issue of the health of the workplace, the community and the environment was through an approach called Pollution Prevention. The aim of Pollution Prevention is to avoid the creation of pollutants in the first place, by preventing them from even entering the workplace as toxic chemical 'inputs'. In this way, 'if it's not there, it can't pollute' – the workplace, the community, or the environment. This approach is contrasted with environmental control measures, in which there is an attempt to control the pollutants 'at the end of the waste pipe', after they have been created and after they have contaminated the workplace.

The other grouping was more specifically environmental, in that it had an interest in the relationship between the workplace and the outside environment, rather than health and safety conditions within it. These union environmental activists saw environmental protection as a moral or political issue where workers had an interest, since workers were both polluters and the victims of pollution. The loyalties of such activists were equally to the union and the environment. I remember with great warmth, these early 'labour environmentalists', such as Rick Coronado and Loretta Woodcock of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), Bob Diamond of the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees (NAPE), Helga Knotte of the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU), Tom Wynn of the United Steelworkers (USW) and Mae Burrows of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU) in British Columbia.

These labour environmental activists did their work at a time when few affiliated unions had environmental policies and no provision for the environment among union staff. They did not, on the whole, have to face the suspicion and skepticism that health and safety activists had to endure nearly a generation ago, but were regarded as somewhat odd, pursuing an issue which was not really of interest or concern to the union. However, the CAW, following the United Auto Workers (UAW) tradition, always did have a provision in its constitution that local unions must have an Environment Committee. Further, some unions, such as the International Woodworkers of America (IWA-Canada) did have policies on the sustainable environment that was necessary to maintain levels of employment. Nowadays, union policies on environment and energy are common, with environmental protection seen as a social value in its own right, not just a consequence of the need for jobs and work. There are also more functional policies on 'green employment' or Green Job Creation. Again, most unions have a service provision for the environment, often as an extension of the

Health and Safety Department. At the grass roots, the most effective labour organizations are the Regional Environmental Councils of the CAW.

The Environment Committee became a Standing Committee of the CLC at about the time I became Director in 1993. It was one of only six such CLC committees. Like other committees, it comprised union staff, a few union officers and rank-and-file activists from public and private sector unions across the country. Considering the strength of the eco-feminist movement, it is surprising that there are and always have been relatively few women on the committee. The main issues to come before the committee concerned toxic chemicals and environmental pollution, reflecting the long-standing health and safety issue of workplace pollution. We did, however, get into the other two broad environmental issues which were natural resources and energy, both conservation and alternative energy sources. All these topics later coalesced in the new discipline and movement for sustainable development.

From the beginning, the committee worked in a way different from other CLC committees and, for that matter, most union committees in Canada. We created an Environmental Liaison Group, which comprised representatives from most of the national environmental groups and some regional ones. The members were invited to take part in Environment Committee meetings with voice but no vote (votes were rare in any case). Since the early 1990's, other union committees have followed suit, with social justice and other grass roots activists invited to committee meetings as 'coalition partners'.

The attempt to have the committee function as an arm of the environmental movement, as well as the labour movement was controversial. Some unionists objected to outsiders being privy to labour meetings. Others feared that the CLC's labour agenda would be submerged in the wider environmental movement and labour values nullified. There was one other major factor. The 'war of the woods' was going on in British Columbia, particularly the bitter feud between Greenpeace and IWA-Canada. The committee and its driving force, CLC Executive Vice-President Dick Martin, were accused of siding with environmentalists against labour. Some demanded that the CLC stay out of forest issues completely. As a result, the CLC has avoided forest issues, apart from some important work on the Species at Risk Act. (There is, in any case, a minimal federal authority over forest policy.)

The committee demanded labour representation on every environmental issue, on every forum, so that labour was recognized as a constituency in its own right, with a distinct perspective. One result is that we took-on some issues that, in the scheme of things, weren't really very useful or significant. Another downside was that, to some in the labour movement, it seemed that we were more interested in butterflies, seals and spotted owls than in human beings and community health. Later, the committee developed much more of a human health slant on the issues, which increased our credibility within labour and

which had a discernable impact on the approaches adopted by the wider environmental movement. The move also made it possible to see environmental protection as an integral part of social unionism.

How were we 'labour environmentalists' regarded by the environmental movement? Some environmental leaders welcomed labour, particularly those in the bigger national environmental organizations. Others were suspicious, even hostile, regarding labour as allied to big polluters and colluding with the forest transnationals to attack environmentalists and screw the environment. Much of this sort of sentiment resided in the myriad of local environmental organizations, the core of the Canadian Environmental Network.

Our effectiveness consists largely in joining and working with such groups. Labour's part in pesticide action campaigns, cancer prevention coalitions and 'toxics watch' groups has done much to overcome this suspicion and hostility. At the same time, and unlike social justice activists, relatively few environmentalists have been hired by the labour movement, activists such as Cliff Stainsby of the BCGEU and Diane Goulet of the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers' Union (CEP) being the exceptions.

The shift from ecological to human health issues was one positive move for labour. Another was the relationship between work and the environment. This should have been obvious from the start, but it was not. I plead that there was so much to learn about environmentalism that we could only develop a labour perspective when we understood all the dimensions of environmentalism itself.

The work-related environmental issues are twofold: Green Job Creation and Just Transition for Workers during Environmental Change. Logically, we should first have to create a host of green, clean and healthy jobs, while concerning ourselves with workers who would lose their jobs in environmentally unsustainable industries. But this was not the way things worked in practice. The Just Transition movement (we can now call it that) started in the US, in the 1970s, the brainchild of the late Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (ICAW). Mazzocchi contended that American industry was so destructive to workers, the public and the environment that there was no alternative but to shut down huge segments of it altogether. Workers would be given compensation, education and retraining to start a new life, much as veterans did after the Second World War. Since Mazzocchi's time, Just Transition has focused much more on industrial transformation rather than deindustrialization but his spirit lives on, the first and the greatest of all the labour environmentalists.

In Canada, Just Transition was taken up by the Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU), then by the CEP (of which the ECWU was a founding component), then by the CLC. The common thread was in the person of Brian Kohler, who joined the CEP from the ECWU at the merger and made a major

contribution to the CLC Just Transition policy, as did the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the United Steelworkers (USW). Just Transition has gained currency recently because of climate change and the alternative industries, particularly energy sources and energy efficiency, that are needed to implement the Kyoto Protocol. Here again, the CEP has been a leader, the first union to produce an energy policy and the union the most influential, with the CLC, of ensuring Canada's adoption of the Kyoto Protocol.

Just Transition has, however, remained largely a slogan and a well-articulated theoretical program. Why so? The reason is that industrial change in Canada has been slow and unimaginative. Had Canadian society and its government been in the vanguard of environmental change, we would by now (for instance) have had our own domestic wind power industry and wind power would be providing more of Canada's electricity. Workers who lost their jobs in redundant mines and ship repair facilities would be building wind towers and turbines – Just Transition in the best sense of the term. But this has not happened: Just Transition has not taken off because there has been no Green Job Creation worth the name.

For all that, environmentalism has enriched the labour movement. You cannot believe in a progressive industrial society without espousing an environmentalism which makes it truly progressive. Without the CLC, Pollution Prevention – this idea of preventing the creation of toxic pollutants instead of controlling them once created – would not have become the national environmental issue that it now is. To have been part of this movement, which is part labour, part environmental and part 'labour environmental' was, for me, the high point of 35 years in the labour movement.