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# Unions as environmental actors

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## Summary

Building on a long history of concerns with the working environment, unions are now addressing issues arising from the debates and policies on the human causes of climate change. This article examines how unions are responding to such issues. Many unions are extending their capacities in relation to environmental concerns and in the process are refocusing their purpose. This is, however, not straightforward: unions are caught in a tension between pressures to ensure job creation and pressures towards environmental responsibility. While unions address climate change as independent organizations, more comprehensive outcomes may be possible via emergent forms of unionism that bring unions and their local communities together in solidaristic ways.

## Résumé

S'appuyant sur une longue expérience des problèmes relatifs à l'environnement de travail, les syndicats abordent aujourd'hui des questions, soulevées par les débats et les politiques, sur les causes humaines du changement climatique. Le présent article examine la manière dont les syndicats répondent à de telles questions. De nombreux syndicats étendent leurs compétences liées aux problèmes environnementaux et ce faisant redéfinissent leurs objectifs. Ceci n'est toutefois pas simple: les syndicats sont tiraillés entre d'une part, la nécessité d'assurer la création d'emplois et d'autre part, celle d'assumer la responsabilité environnementale. Certes, les syndicats abordent le changement climatique en tant qu'organisations indépendantes, mais il y a d'autres formes de syndicalisation regroupant les syndicats et leurs communautés locales dans un esprit de solidarité qui se font jour et qui rendent possible des résultats beaucoup plus larges.

## Zusammenfassung

Aufbauend auf ihrer langen Erfahrung mit Fragen der Arbeitswelt befassen sich Gewerkschaften inzwischen auch mit Themen, die sich aus den Debatten und Strategien zu den menschlichen

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Ursachen des Klimawandels ergeben. Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie die Gewerkschaften auf diese Themen reagieren. Viele Gewerkschaften stärken ihre Kapazitäten in Bezug auf Umweltfragen und richten während dieses Prozesses ihre Zielsetzungen neu aus. Dies ist jedoch alles andere als einfach: die Gewerkschaften bewegen sich in einem Spannungsfeld zwischen dem Druck, die Schaffung neuer Arbeitsplätze sicher zu stellen und andererseits im Umweltbereich Verantwortung zu übernehmen. Gewerkschaften gehen Fragen des Klimawandels als unabhängige Organisationen an. Durch neue Formen der Gewerkschaftsbewegung, die Gewerkschaften und ihre örtlichen Gemeinschaften in solidaristischen Bewegungen zusammenbringen, könnten jedoch umfassendere Ergebnisse erzielt werden.

### Keywords

Trade unions, union renewal, union purpose, environmental actors, climate change, green jobs

### Introduction

Unions have a long history of engaging with environmental concerns including climate change. In recent years, there has been increasing evidence of such concerns at different levels of union activity. Global unions such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the global union federations have developed position statements on climate change, proposed at a range of international forums (e.g. ITUC et al., 2006; TUAC Secretariat, 2008). These federations have extended such work to include environmental clauses in international framework agreements, which set out commitments on specific environmental issues (ILO, 2007).

At national level, trade unions are becoming significant environmental participants. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the United Kingdom is promoting awareness at conferences and seminars on climate change (TUC, 2008). In Germany, unions have been involved in policy formation processes aiming to reduce carbon emissions and expand the renewable energy sector. Unions and environmental groups in the US have forged alliances, for example the Apollo Alliance on Climate Change and the Blue-Green Alliance (Gera, 2008). These alliances aim to engage governments, employers, training bodies and workers in the promotion of 'green jobs' related to both a sustainability agenda and a poverty alleviation strategy for inner city areas. In the UK, where union involvement on climate change has evolved out of past engagements about nuclear energy and weaponry, and health and safety at work, there are efforts to train 'green delegates' to promote more sustainable workplaces.

At face value, such developments can be seen either as significant or disparate. Our argument here is not only that they are potentially significant but also that as unions construct an environmental role for themselves this can help shape a new sense of union purpose. To explore this proposition, we examine trade union activities in Australia, a country facing and expected to confront immense social, economic and environmental challenges because of the social impacts of climate change. Australian unions therefore provide an excellent test case to explore some of the implications of climate change for union renewal.

### Union renewal and environmental concerns

Debates about union futures and union renewal principally focus on union organization and capacity (see, for example, Lévesque and Murray, 2002, and in this issue). Such analyses centre on the development of the capacities, capabilities and organizational forms that will enable unions to address the challenges they face. Recently, there has been much debate about capacity building.

Lévesque and Murray (2002) originally proposed a three-point model, focusing on internal solidarity, external solidarity and proactive initiatives. In this thematic issue, they further modify and specify that model, making the argument that unions need to focus on both their resources and their capabilities to build their capacity. One way of extending the debate is to consider the ways in which a sense of union purpose is enhanced and developed around specific issues such as climate change. We maintain that central to the debates about union renewal is a relatively unexplored dimension, which is bound up in the oft asked question: what do unions do? Our argument is that the social, economic and industrial implications of social change stemming from climate change provide possibilities for unions to renew themselves with a new sense of purpose, but doing so is not a straightforward process.

Broadly, three themes are evident in the debates about unions and the working environment. First, unions have a history as environmental actors, with specific reference to the working environment, particularly in relation to health and safety at work (e.g. Nichols, 1997; Quinlan, 1998). For many unions this involved the promotion of public policy, emphasizing the importance of regulation. Second, unions have an understandable and appropriate concern with the defence of jobs; workers have an enduring interest in job protection (UNEP, 2007). Such preoccupation often places unions in antagonistic relations with 'new' social movements (Obach, 2004). Third, unions increasingly have looked to alliances and coalitions as one part of building a defence of their employment position as well as addressing wider policy concerns (for example, Tattersall, 2009).

To move these debates forward, it is helpful to consider the way unions forge their purposes in changing contexts. Conceptually, unions are caught in a tension between their role as a 'vested interest' and their role as a 'sword of justice' (Flanders, 1970). Such tensions are shaped by political and occupational differences between unions and the context in which they operate. Beginning in the 1980s in the advanced capitalist societies, unions were devastated by downsizing and deindustrialization. Rather than confront these changed circumstances, many unions narrowed their interests and purpose, focusing on adaptation rather than alternatives (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; MacInnes, 1987). Nevertheless, these are enduring concerns, and the question is whether and how unions can refocus their role and shape their purpose in the changing political economy.

Three analytical challenges confront unions as environmental actors. First, although 'vested interests' and 'social justice' should not be viewed always as stark alternatives, they do create ongoing tensions; that is why unions are often caught in dilemmas between defending current jobs and/or seeking to make jobs more environmentally responsible. Second, the social implications of climate change also raise the possibility of 'green' jobs. However, it is not clear whether the issue is 'green' jobs or decent and socially useful jobs. Third, the prevailing ways that most unions organize and operate in relation to environmental concerns are often quite limited. Different or distinctive forms of solidarity may be necessary to develop awareness and construct strategies to address climate change. Each of these challenges draws attention to contending projects for the future, in which other organizations in the local community often also play a significant role.

## **The Australian experience: an overview**

Like other countries, there is a long experience of union engagement with environmental matters in Australia. This involvement came to the forefront in the early 1970s when one of the main unions in the construction industry – the Builders Labourers Federation – selectively embargoed demolition or building work as a way to protect heritage buildings, secure public space and preserve the environment. Known as 'green bans' unions sought to preserve the built and natural environment from unsustainable development in and around Sydney (Burgmann and Burgmann,

1998). The use of ‘green bans’ was extended throughout the 1970s as a way to influence public policy. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) – Australia’s single peak labour confederation at national level – also banned the mining, handling and export of uranium in 1976. In the same year, two of the predecessor component unions of what was to become a major merged union in the transport industry (the Rail, Tram and Bus Union – RTBU) – the Australian Railways Union (ARU) and the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen (AFULE) – held a 24-hour strike in opposition to the development of uranium mining in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Waterside Workers Federation (one of the predecessor component unions of what would become the major dockworkers’ union, the Maritime Union of Australia – MUA) campaigned against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific and the dumping of toxic waste (Copper and Hearn, 1981; for parallel developments in the UK, see Mason and Morter, 1998). More recently, the ACTU has supported the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) developed by the Rudd Labor government. It should be noted that this government was elected in 2007, after a campaign in which both environmental and rights at work issues featured significantly. This 2007 election victory represented a significant policy shift after four consecutive federal electoral victories by a conservative coalition government under the leadership of the then Prime Minister, John Howard.

This history of principled stances on the part of a variety of Australian unions is frequently celebrated. The stories that receive less flattering comments are the defensive stances taken by some – and even the same – unions on environmental matters. In 2004, for example, Tasmanian forestry workers, loggers working in the ‘old growth’ forests, clashed with environmentalists under banners such as ‘Tasmanian timber creates Tasmanian jobs’, ‘Greens tell lies’ and ‘my dad needs a job’ (Kingsnorth, 2004). Moreover, these workers, from the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU – Forestry and Furnishing Products Division), expressed support for the notoriously anti-union conservative coalition government in 2004. This was in part a reaction to an Australian Labor Party (ALP) election policy, which sought to protect the state’s native forests from logging. The then Prime Minister, John Howard, promised forestry workers that their jobs would be safe if he were re-elected and for this he received a standing ovation from 2 000 workers (mostly CFMEU Forestry and Furnishing Products Division members) at one rally. Australian unions have also lent support to the extension of uranium mining and large-scale coal exports to China and India. Such events bring unions into troubled relations with the environmental movement.

These examples also illustrate the tensions between different sections of union memberships, often within the same union. Many unions have members in the ‘Emission-Intensive Trade Exposed’ (EITE) industries, which are highlighted in the Australian government’s proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. Environmental questions are central in these industries, as they also are in industries where steps are being taken to promote ‘green skills’. As a result, the material interests of one group of union members may be at variance with another. Nowhere is this clearer than in the ranks of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union. On the one hand, one division of the CFMEU – the Forestry and Furnishing Products Division – has actively campaigned for ‘old growth’ logging and the expansion of the wood chip industry. On the other hand, another division of the CFMEU – the Mining and Energy Division – which is the principal union in the black and brown coal industry, has been critical of coal industry statements against the Carbon

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1 Any historical presentation of union names in Australia has to contend with a major wave of union mergers in the early 1990s, the result of both ACTU policy and broader occupational and bargaining structure trends. As we will see below, this legacy often has implications for the relations within these merged unions or what we will label the predecessor component union.

Pollution Reduction Scheme. Major employers, such as the electricity generating employers, where this latter division of the CFMEU is represented, managed to secure an enhanced financial commitment from the federal government if the scheme is agreed. Thus, these two divisions often adopt different stances towards similar issues, especially on environmental matters, explained by both occupation and industry variations and the fact that the union divisions, once autonomous unions before their merger, often still act as semi-independent unions.

Unions have also looked to the main political parties to address environmental concerns. Many unions are affiliated to the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which they (or their antecedents) helped create in 1891. Such unions play an active role within the ALP and they attempt to influence policy both formally and informally. In contrast, most unions reluctantly dealt with the conservative coalition governments when they were in office from 1996 to 2007. Successive coalition governments sought to marginalize unions, as illustrated in particular by the anti-union legislation passed by the Howard government (Workplace Relations Amendment Act (Work Choices) Act 2005). On climate change, this same government adopted positions that most commentators labelled as that of 'climate change sceptics' (e.g. Taylor, 2007). In the 2007 election, the ALP, with the support of many unions, including the ACTU, made climate change and the need to reduce carbon emissions a major political issue and one that assisted them in winning office. Since taking office, the Rudd-led Labor government has attempted to address climate change through a range of policy approaches.

In recent years, the Australian Greens have become a small but influential political force although union leaderships have tended to look past this party and maintain their strong links with the ALP. For some unions, like the CFMEU's Forestry and Furnishing Products Division, the Australian Greens' environmental policies are seen as a direct threat to the livelihoods of their members. However, a handful of union leaders, such as the Victorian Secretary of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), have actively supported the Australian Greens. Thus, the political party with the most elaborated policies on environmental matters is seen both as a problem by some union leaders and as a positive advocate of green matters by others.

To explore the way in which Australian unions address the tension between their roles as environmental actors and the union objective to deal with industrial matters, we develop three particular themes below. First, we examine the way that some unions attempt to defend jobs on the one hand and represent their members in the context of climate change, on the other. Second, we show how some unions have sought to promote environmental matters at a policy level, arguing for a 'green jobs' and 'green skills' approach. Third, we examine the way that a comprehensive engagement with these matters, coupled with formulating distinct alternative visions, may involve the development of emergent forms of solidarity between unions, at a local community level. On the basis of this Australian experience, we then explore some of the more general implications for unions and their place in the debates about the environment.

## **Defending jobs – improving representation**

One core union purpose is to represent members and defend jobs. As the debate on environmental responsibility has unfolded, unions have formulated environmentally aware policies (ACTU and ACF, 2008; AMWU, 2008). They have also sought to defend their membership, many of whom are threatened by major government initiatives, such as the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. Against this background, individual unions have sought to represent their members' interests in relation to these policies.

One organizing and mobilizing strategy on climate change is via direct populist appeals by national leaderships to members and on behalf of them. This approach is evident in the case of the two major Australian unions, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the CFMEU (Mining and Energy Division). Both of these unions organize in the 'Emission-Intensive Trade Exposed' (EITE) industries. Both have also been active in positioning their approaches to the social implications of climate change. For the AWU, which has its roots in agriculture and mining and a reputation as a so-called moderate union, the concern has been to secure a future for export industries, such as aluminium, coal and uranium (see the selection of public statements by the National Secretary on Facebook, AWU, 2010). The claim is that the union can work and even form partnerships with employers to take steps to ameliorate the consequences of carbon pollution, forming an alliance with some of nation's largest emissions-intensive companies, including Rio Tinto, Shell, Alcoa and BlueScope Steel. According to the AWU's National Secretary, 'we know by keeping good jobs in industries like these smelters and refineries here in Australia we are actually helping in the battle against greenhouse gases' (cited in Nichols, 2008). In contrast, the CFMEU (Mining and Energy Division) discourages using public money to compensate heavy polluters for the cost of emissions trading. Instead, it argues for government investment in research and development and technologies. In an unusual twist in Australia, where unions in these threatened industries often support employer claims about the threats of such schemes, the CFMEU (Mining and Energy Division) has often criticized the coal companies for exaggerating the financial and employment costs of emissions trading (e.g. CFMEU, 2009). It is through such activity that the CFMEU leadership seeks to demonstrate their commitment to environmental responsibility.

A complementary but distinct approach rests on recasting representational forms, developing focused forms of representation, often referring to more traditional approaches to workplace environment matters, for example via health and safety representatives and associated committees. One approach entails dedicated representatives, trained and aware of the social implications of climate change. The Queensland Public Service Union's 'climate change heroes' programme offers a good example of this approach (Queensland Public Service Union, 2010). Cast in terms of 'climate change action', the union seeks to focus action around dedicated representatives, operating on relevant committees and promoting policy change at a workplace level. Another example is that of the major union in the higher education sector with the National Tertiary Education Union's (NTEU) commitment to encourage 'Climate Champions' (NTEU, 2009a). Focusing on its members in three universities in the state of Victoria (Deakin University, Monash University and University of Melbourne), the union invited its members to become 'Climate Champions'. These representatives receive an Action Kit suggesting activity in the workplace, at home and in the community. These 'Climate Champions' sit on the NTEU Environment Committee at their institution, charged with 'developing and campaigning for institution-wide improvements to sustainable practices' (NTEU, 2009a). Alongside this focused activity, the Victorian Trades Hall Council, which is the name of the union confederation for unions in the state of Victoria, is in the process of developing a training package for environmental delegates (for a similar initiative in the UK, led by the TUC, see Mason and Morter, 1998 and on Europe see ETUC et al., 2007). Such training prepares union representatives to play an active part in the workplace, on committees dealing with environmental matters and within the union.

Developing and participating in forums, such as environment committees, requires planning, awareness development and cooperative employers. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), for example, has been working with universities to develop and promote sustainable practices. Such practices include the more efficient and effective use of energy, promotion of



recycling and similar procedures, and developing climate change awareness. There is variation from university to university. The local union at the University of Queensland has encouraged activity involving staff and students, and taken steps to promote a broadly based awareness (NTEU, 2009b). At other universities, there has been less activity, more typically involving delegates and branch leaders rather than members.

Two processes are at work. First, the unions cited in relation to the (EITE) industries are attempting to assist and encourage employers to achieve sustainable goals in relation to climate change politics, advocating a mix of market and state-based initiatives. Second, some unions, such as those cited in the public sector, are experimenting with ways to develop and expand dedicated forms of representation to articulate environmentally responsible policies and practices. In the main, unions have worked through existing patterns and forms of representation within each union, often in partnership with employer-based consultative committees. Such initiatives, however, have not addressed the question of 'green' jobs as such, although many will have views on this subject (e.g. The Australian, 2009).

### **'Green' jobs, decent jobs and different jobs?**

The question of jobs draws attention to a troubling distinction, that between 'green' jobs and jobs more generally. Not all jobs are 'green' jobs and not all jobs can become 'green' jobs. Nonetheless, it is the case that most if not all jobs could be 'decent' jobs. Such distinctions are recognized by the following definition where 'green' jobs are:

... positions in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, installation, and maintenance, as well as scientific and technical, administrative, and service-related activities, that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality. Specifically, but not exclusively, this includes jobs that help to protect and restore ecosystems and biodiversity; reduce energy, materials, and water consumption through high-efficiency and avoidance strategies; de-carbonize the economy; and minimize or altogether avoid generation of all forms of waste and pollution (Worldwatch Institute, 2008: 35–36).

Such jobs are defined by function in relation to environmental quality. There is, however, an important qualification, which not only applies to these jobs but to all decent jobs:

But green jobs ... also need to be good jobs that meet longstanding demands and goals of the labor movement, i.e. adequate wages, safe working conditions, and worker rights, including the right to organize labor unions (Worldwatch Institute, 2008: 36).

Workers in 'green' jobs should also be able to realize their rights as workers.

Jobs have been promoted as 'green' but the rights of workers have been overlooked. Recent 'green collar' initiatives in Australia have been driven by federal government funding associated with its 2009 economic stimulus package in response to the global financial and economic crisis. Focusing on improving home energy efficiencies, the government provided financial support for home insulation. The death of four young workers in 2009–2010 while installing home insulation and the possible electrification of roofs (resulting in housefires) by unqualified installers involved in these schemes provoked strong condemnation by the ACTU and building trades unions (as well as many media outlets). They pointed to inadequate government regulation, poor training and 'dodgy contractors and unqualified operators' (Workforce, 2010: 2). The National Secretary of



CFMEU's Construction and General Division, a member of the government steering committee that oversaw the scheme, accused the government of not listening to union concerns about the lack of training. In February 2010, in response to public pressure, the federal government ended the scheme. Thus, while the jobs were 'green' in that they were in an industry where the task was to improve energy use and efficiency they were not 'decent' jobs, where workers' rights were recognized, in relation to skills, training and safety.

A different approach entails policies and programmes to retrain existing workers in the skills necessary for a 'green' economy as well as training new workers. This approach is especially evident in unions representing skilled manual workers. In July 2008, the Plumbing Division within the Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU), in conjunction with a range of other industry and trade bodies announced the opening of a 'Green Plumbing Centre'. These other organizations included the Master Plumbers and Mechanical Services Association of Australia, the National Fire Industry Association and the Air Conditioning and Mechanical Contractors' Association of Victoria, the Plumbing Industry Commission and the Building Commission, as well as the Victorian State government. This Centre will 'train plumbers in sustainable, energy saving, waste reducing and water saving plumbing techniques' (Victorian government, 2008). Training, however, is a first step towards the creation of 'green' jobs. The second step is that the jobs 'are respectful and protective not only of the natural environment, but also of workers' health, human needs, and rights' (Worldwatch Institute, 2008: 40).

Another possibility is to promote the manufacture of goods that contribute to a low carbon environment. Such jobs, however, may not in themselves be 'green', although the industry may be central to achieving a low carbon environment, such as the manufacture of wind turbines. Together with the Victorian State government, the CEPU (and other unions) has worked with a variety of companies, and particularly Siemens, in an attempt to promote the manufacture of wind generators in the Latrobe Valley (Victoria, Australia), where there is a particular concentration of brown coal-fired generators. Prototype work was done and a number of units were produced demonstrating the feasibility of creating alternative 'green' industry and employment opportunities for workers in the region. However, despite this union involvement and supportive action by Earthworker, an activist campaigning group in favour of green initiatives, the proposal eventually came to nothing when Siemens pulled out because of a lack of state government support (Burgmann et al., 2002). More recently, the CFMEU (Mining and Energy Division) and Earthworker members have taken steps to establish a cooperative in the Latrobe Valley to manufacture and install solar hot water systems, now in the final stages of development, with a business plan, a product and an organizational committee. The intention is to ensure that not only are such jobs respectful of workers' rights as workers, but also to make sure that the manufacturing processes involve energy efficiency, pollution control and clean production techniques. For unions and associated campaign groups, such as Earthworker, these are the incremental steps towards a more sustainable future. However, the fate of the initiative lies with state and the federal governments, in relation to start-up funds; in March 2010 an application for such funds to the Commonwealth Government Jobs Fund Scheme was turned down – the Fund's remit is to promote local jobs and rebuild communities. Thus, in a market context such proposals are often dependent on state support.

The key issue here is the extent to which 'green' jobs debates involve enlarging the boundaries of union purpose by seeking to build industrial capacity while, at the same time, focusing on the emerging environmental context for union organizations. It is clear that such debates are the source of tensions. It is, of course, relatively easy to dismiss the idea of 'green' jobs and simply to argue for job protection. The challenge for unions, however, is twofold: to ensure that jobs

(‘green’ or otherwise) are quality jobs and that employers in these sectors recognize and value workers individually and collectively.

## **Emergent forms of solidarity at the community level**

As was illustrated above, many Australian unions are now engaged in some form of debate about the social and industrial implications of climate change. The sources of this involvement are multi-fold. For some, it stems from the industries they organize, such as coal or electricity generation, which are the focus of public debate and government policy. For others, such as the public service unions, there is a desire to improve their representational structures and develop awareness programmes on new issues of concern to their members. For the unions representing skilled manual unions, the promotion of training is an important motivation. What this mix of union policy approaches and motivations overlooks is the degree to which union leaders and members can move beyond current practices on the environment and develop new forms of solidarity for a ‘green’ vision of the future.

The clue to the way unions could begin to redefine their purpose and promote a comprehensive engagement with environmental matters is potentially illustrated by emerging alliances between unions, other social movements and state bodies. This is particularly evident where unions have begun to focus their activity over green transitions at a local level, in regional communities, where individual unions come together via local union councils. Unions in communities that host EITE or carbon-intensive industries tend to be at the forefront of these developments (e.g. Donaldson et al., 2009). As unions address questions relating to climate change and the transitions to a ‘green’ economy, these types of initiatives are likely to become more common and offer valuable cases for understanding unions as environmental actors.

The South Coast Labour Council in the state of New South Wales (NSW), for example, has actively worked to develop a Green Jobs initiative for the Illawarra region. It is a traditional industrial community south of Sydney, where job loss continues and where the industries have been the focus of much debate about the transition to low carbon economies. The Illawarra Green Jobs Project (Donaldson et al., 2009) began in April 2009. It involved a range of organizations, including the South Coast Labour Council, the University of Wollongong, the Illawarra Business Chamber, Australian Industry Group, and local shire and New South Wales government representatives. It aimed to demonstrate to investors and various levels of government that Illawarra could lead the nation as a ‘sustainable region’ through ‘greener residential and commercial buildings, alternative power generation, manufacturing alternative energy equipment components as well as future training and research pathways’ (South Coast Labour Council, 2009: 1). The project identified a series of enterprises that contributed to environmental sustainability (e.g. water recycling); it assessed industry capacity and developed a regional skills profile. The purpose of the analysis was to specify the ‘green’ industries that could be developed in Illawarra and to propose policies to promote Illawarra’s position in the green economy.

In the state of Victoria’s Latrobe Valley, the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, which brings together unions in Victoria’s major coal region, is pursuing a similar policy formation process, with the accompanying steps towards an industrial transition. The local union leadership who comprise the labour council, drawn from the energy generators, manufacturing (such as a large paper mill), transport, education and other sectors in the area, have organized a series of awareness and policy events to publicize and draw attention to the continued problem of uncertainty for the region in a carbon-constrained world. The brown coal power generators in the Latrobe Valley, responsible for nearly 90 percent of Victoria’s electricity, are under considerable economic

and political pressure, with threats by some to end electricity generation (International Power Australia, 2008). In addition, this area experienced huge job losses as a result of the privatization of these generators in the mid-1990s. In the face of uncertainty about the future of the generators, and in the context of industrial stagnation in the area, the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council sees its role as promoting sustainable alternative jobs while arguing for the maintenance and expansion of jobs *per se* in the area. While the Latrobe Valley is likely to remain a centre of energy production and expertise for years to come, the local labour council has argued the need to diversify the regional economy through new types of investment and sustainable regional development policy (Parker, 2009). The base line for most of the leadership is the protection and expansion of jobs in the area, in full awareness that the generators may have a limited life span. Nonetheless, the labour council remains a relatively small group of activist leaders. Moreover, not all local unions are even affiliated to or active within the local labour council. Such is the case, for example, of the Australian Workers Unions and the Electrical Trades Union. Despite these limitations and tensions within the union movement, the council is an important regional actor, campaigning for a sustainable future for the area.

The activity of these two labour councils illustrates how unions can be caught in tensions between advocating a sustainable and environmentally respectful future and the protection and promotion of jobs. On the one hand, labour councils, representing affiliate unions in a particular locality or region, are in a position to provide a lead in relation to carbon pollution and industrial regeneration. As a forum, they are in a position to look beyond the specific interests and concerns of individual unions. On the other hand, these councils represent and speak on behalf of the affiliates and as such, they have a compelling concern with job protection. In this respect, the councils may be able to lay the foundation within the union movement for constructive approaches for a community transition to a green economy but will also be shaped by material concerns with jobs and job security.

### **Climate change, union purpose and union renewal**

On the basis of the Australian experiences outlined above, we argue that unions are in the process of redefining their purpose in two respects. The first refers to the way that unions organize and operate in relation to the environment, drawing on established capacities and extending them where appropriate. The second refers to the possibility of building forms of solidarity to address environmental matters.

All unions are bound up in complex relations bringing together labour, capital and the state. Over time, these relations become formalized and often routine, even when these relations are antagonistic rather than cooperative. Labour (in the form of trade unions) may seek to cooperate with capital (as employers) to ensure a green transition or to defend jobs. Such cooperation and conflict occur in the context of asymmetrical power relations (Murray et al., 2000). It is here that the tensions within unions, between 'social justice' and 'vested interests' are expressed. Such pressures are played out in complex ways. In working with employers to protect jobs, unions often face uncomfortable compromises between job security and respect for the environment. Indeed, they may end up supporting the very employers that exploit their labour and pollute the environment. In contrast, when unions seek to set up cooperative production units, promote 'green' training institutions, and even question the viability and need for major polluting industries, they are also opening up the possibility of alternative futures.

The difficulty of working with employers, however, is that it is typically the employers' agenda that prevails. The relation between employers and workers *qua* workers is an asymmetrical one,

weighted in favour of employers, be it in the public or private sector. The union response to this asymmetry is to attempt to build capacity through their representative structures and activities. As noted at the outset of this article, unions have a long history of addressing and dealing with the working environment (Obach, 2004). Some have sought to build their capacity by modelling their representational activity on the capacities developed via struggle, negotiation and experience in dealing with employers about the working environment.

Unions forge their purposes in relation to their capacities as voluntary collective organizations seeking to articulate and represent the interests of their members as workers. The difficulty is to define these interests, and in the case of the environment, this draws attention to the debate about 'green' jobs, and the place of such jobs in the economy. The starting point for defining 'green jobs' is by function, the areas in which the work is located (e.g. waste recycling) and the content of the jobs, in terms of the way it contributes to environmental efficiency. But, as argued above, there is often no guarantee that these are 'decent' jobs, where work is carried out in an informed, skilled, cooperatively managed and time considerate ways. It is also the case that many other jobs also may not be 'decent' ones. That is how some unions come to focus on training and awareness as the critical steps towards an environmentally responsible employment world, whether in the 'green' sector or not. More than this, as with all jobs, unless labour rights are a core component of employment relations, then the job cannot be a 'decent' one. While few unions have embraced such a conception of jobs, key aspects of this definition of jobs often inform union policy on jobs, and 'green' jobs are no exception to this stricture.

Implicitly, jobs are central to a broader set of relations, what can be termed the political economy of work and employment. While much analysis centres on what these relations mean in relation to the labour process, pointing to the indeterminacy of these relations (Hyman, 1989), it is also necessary to locate the analysis within a broader understanding of society. In the same way that cooperation and conflict are central to the social relations that define employer-employee relations in the labour process, so too this is the case in the broader political economy of these relations. In both industrial and environmental terms, this is a struggle that involves and goes beyond a narrow conception of trade union purpose.

While much writing on union renewal focuses on the conditions for and the drivers of renewal (e.g. Turner, 2006; Cohen, 2006), our concern here is with way unions come to reshape their purpose. To trigger such movement there has to be an impetus or an occasion for renewal, a 'crisis' of concern, for leaders and their members (Voss and Sherman, 2003). We believe that in the case of climate change there is such a 'crisis'. It can be seen in the unfolding demands and developments associated with climate change, and the more pressing practical problems arising from the vulnerable position of Australia in relation to water, industrial degradation, a resource based export economy, and the many associated uncertainties. While not a 'crisis' in the sense suggested by some – immediate, threatening and resolvable (e.g. Voss and Sherman, 2003) – it is a 'crisis that provides unions the opportunity to seek out and develop alternative futures'. The cases of the labour councils explored above support the proposition that it is when unions work with each other, and with other organizations in the local community, that they are able to turn the question of job protection into arguments for social change that is environmentally respectful. Thus, unions have begun to take tentative steps in organizing in communities, with other groups and sections in the community, about the constitution of jobs as quality jobs, and as voluntary collective organizations that can provide visions of a 'green' future.

There are, however, limits and tensions in this process. Inasmuch as some unions are in the process of constructing a 'politico-ecological' role for themselves that expresses a 'green' vision for the future of work (Mason and Morter, 1998: 4), they also must confront their need

to protect the interests of the workers and members they represent whose lives depend upon the continuation and expansion of economic activity. Through this process, these unions may be embracing and discovering a new sense of purpose, most often within and not necessarily counter to the dominant globalized production relations. To move beyond this stage would require a monumental shift on the part of unions and a revitalization of their revolutionary potential, to challenge the prevailing order with small-scale experiments (green cooperative forms of production) and broadly-based campaigns (in relation to a green economy). In the meantime, unions are likely to continue to wrestle with the tensions between job protection, respect of the natural environment and labour rights or decent jobs. The danger is that job protection prevails above all else.

## Conclusion

Forging an inclusive social purpose is the task facing unions. While unions have always looked to their purpose and shaped it in relation to the material and political circumstances in which they operate, they face two challenges in addressing the questions that arise in relation to environmental responsibility. First, in the prevailing international political economy, the balance between the market and state regulation has shifted towards an acceptance of the market by governments and by default many unions in practice. In these circumstances, unions face difficult decisions as they try to address the implications of environmental change. Second, and underpinning the first challenge, unions face decisions in reconciling the ongoing tensions in relation to unions in a capitalist society between 'vested interest' and 'social justice'. In relation to environmental responsibility, this tension often takes the form of job protection and security alongside decent jobs and 'green' jobs.

The immediacy of material concerns prevails in these circumstances. After all, the union movement is a materialist movement representing those involved in production and related activity. The challenge is to shift those who exercise control of the material world (employers) to use their resources more responsibly, labour and environmental resources included. It is here that unions have a unique role as environmental actors. It is the same role they have always played although they may have ignored the environmental aspects, which did not appear to impinge directly upon workers in the past.

The quest for 'decent' jobs is central to union purpose. Historically, most unions have campaigned for such jobs, often taking into account the material and financial circumstances of employers. In addition, unions have always sought to ensure that basic labour rights are recognized, such as freedom of association, a living wage, job security and increasingly an appropriate work-life balance. With the debate about 'green' jobs and environmental responsibility, many unions have begun to explore what such jobs may comprise. While key to the debate because 'green' jobs are part of a commitment to environmental responsibility, it is also necessary to locate such jobs within the broader union purpose of securing 'decent' jobs. Such jobs also mean that workers are able to realize their basic labour rights. Thus, union purpose in relation to environmental responsibility means campaigning for 'decent' jobs and securing the recognition of labour rights. Thus, unions have an inclusive social purpose; the task is to realize this purpose.

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