

## The Roles of Labor Unions

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Understanding labor unions is essential for anyone working in the field of occupational and environmental health. Some in this field work directly with a unionized workforce. Others work in government agencies where labor unions are important “stakeholders.” Some work on social-justice or environmental campaigns that need labor support to succeed. Others perform research that requires labor participation. The labor movement will influence even those whose work never brings them in direct contact with a union because of labor’s significant political and practical effects on occupational and environmental health.

Unions have been the most significant force in the United States advocating for safety protection and decent working conditions not only for their own members but for all American workers (Fig. 32-1). Throughout the twentieth century, unions lobbied in the political arena for health and safety protection, the minimum wage, and child labor laws. Without the labor movement, it is unlikely that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), jobs for occupational health and safety professionals, or an organized voice to effectively promote workers’ rights would exist.

Unions have also played important roles in environmental health. In the 1960s, the labor movement supported environmental protection

and the civil rights, women’s rights, and anti-Vietnam War movements.<sup>1</sup> Later, conflict between some unions and environmental organizations led to a general perception of hostility between these groups. However, workers and environmentalists have increasingly collaborated through “blue-green alliances” that bring together the “blue-collar” working class and “green” environmentalists (Fig. 32-2). The recent push to transition to a “green economy” has heightened interest in ongoing collaboration.

### AN INTRODUCTION TO LABOR UNIONS

The role of unions is to represent and pursue the collective interests of workers. These interests include wages, hours, benefits, and conditions of employment, including health and safety. Many unions also consider, as part of their mission, building a better society. Thus, they address issues that extend beyond the workplace, such as peace, justice, and quality of life.

Approximately 15 million Americans belong to a union, representing about 12% of the total U.S. labor force. The number of workers in unions has remained relatively stable, but the percentage of U.S. workers represented by unions has decreased substantially, from a peak of 33% in 1955. As the U.S. economy has changed dramatically, jobs have been lost in sectors that



**Figure 32-1.** UNITE protest against sweatshop working conditions. (Photograph by Earl Dotter.)



**Figure 32-2.** Coal workers visiting the site of a coal cleaning plant to learn more about the hazards of its emissions for environmental health. (Photograph by Earl Dotter.)

were highly organized (unionized) and replaced by jobs in sectors where union organizing has been more difficult. Service jobs are increasing as traditional manufacturing jobs are decreasing. Part-time and contract work are growing. The degree of unionization varies significantly from sector to sector, with the highest levels in government (42%) and education (39%) and the lowest in finance and insurance, agriculture, and private social/community services.<sup>2</sup>

The core work of labor is typically carried out at the level of the local union. Local unions (“locals”) represent workers in a single workplace or group of workplaces. They may include members in a specific trade or in a range of occupations. Locals are often responsible for negotiating collective bargaining agreements (union contracts) with employers and enforcing these agreements through grievance procedures. Locals are designed to be democratic institutions, governed by officers who are elected by union members. Some members serve as shop stewards, who represent their co-workers and help enforce union contracts. Many locals also hire staff members to help enforce contracts (*union representatives and business agents*) or to expand membership (*organizers*). Locals typically belong to an *international union*, which is comprised of many locals of the same union in the United States and often other countries. (See Box 32-1.)

The American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and Change to Win are voluntary confederations, comprising a total of more than 63 international unions. The majority of U.S. union members belong to unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO or Change to Win. These confederations engage in political action, lobbying, education, and organizing on behalf of the labor movement as a whole. They bring different unions together, not only on the national level but also within states and local communities. (See Box 32-2 and the labor federations listed in the Appendix.)

## BENEFITS OF UNIONIZATION

Workers belong to unions for a variety of reasons. Two important reasons are to have input about their working conditions and to have

representation, ensuring that they will be treated fairly at the workplace. Unionized workers generally fare much better in terms of salary and benefits than their nonunionized counterparts. Overall, union workers in the United States earn approximately one-third more than nonunion workers. The wage difference is even greater for minorities and women. Union workers also are more likely than nonunion workers to receive health care, retirement, and short-term disability benefits (Fig. 32-3).<sup>3</sup>

About 60 million (53%) of workers in the United States would choose to have union representation if they could.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. labor movement has been trying to address this need by developing innovative strategies to bring unionization to workers in new and expanding sectors of the economy. In addition to providing professional representation and other services to existing members, unions are seeking to involve both organized and unorganized workers in actively finding solutions to the issues that affect them. Promoting active worker involvement both attracts and retains members.

Many labor leaders have discovered that, in addition to protecting their members, health and safety advocacy can be a dynamic and powerful issue in building unions. Hundreds of thousands of workers go to work each day in pain. Workers navigate through their work shifts, anxious about unsafe working conditions. For many, health and safety is a matter of basic human dignity and respect. In a recent poll, 64% of workers who responded said that workplace safety and health was a leading factor in their decision to join a union; benefits was a leading factor for 60%, wages for 57%, and job security for 54%.<sup>5</sup>

## New Approaches for a Changing Workforce

The U.S. workforce of the early twenty-first century is increasingly comprised of women, people of color, and recent immigrants. Workers in these groups, often lacking power and an organized voice, are typically channeled into the lowest paid, most dangerous, and highly stressful jobs.<sup>6</sup> Organized labor is seeking ways to reach out to these workers and to address their special concerns. Unions are taking the lead in

**Box 32-1.** Glossary of Key Labor Terms

| Term   | Definition  |
|--|---|
| Affiliate  | A union that is a member of a central labor body or federation of unions.   |
| Agency shop                                      | A provision in a contract that requires all nonunion members in a bargaining unit, as a condition of employment, to pay the union a fixed amount for services rendered, such as representation.   |
| Bargaining unit                                  | A group of employees recognized by the employer or designated by an authorized government agency for purposes of collective bargaining.   |
| Building and Construction Trades Council         | Unions that represent the construction trades are typically affiliated with the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department. There are state and local councils (parallel to the CLCs).   |
| Central Labor Council (CLC)                      | An organization made up of most local unions in a geographic area, often a county. CLC member locals represent many different trades and international unions. CLCs engage in political action, education, lobbying, and organizing on a local level.   |
| Certification election (representation election) | An election, usually conducted by the National Labor Relations Board or a state board, in which employees in a bargaining unit vote for or against representation by a union. ("Card check" is another way that employees join unions—if a majority sign union cards and the employer recognizes the union, they do not have to go through the often drawn-out and difficult election process.)   |
| Closed shop (union shop)                         | A provision in a contract that requires the employer to employ only union members.  |
| Collective bargaining agreement/contract         | A written agreement between a union and employer. Both parties make offers and counter-offers on the conditions of employment for the purpose of reaching agreement. The process is called collective bargaining and the resulting agreement, signed by both parties, is the collective bargaining agreement or "union contract." The contract addresses matters such as wages, hours, working conditions, and procedures for settling disputes. A contract usually must be ratified by a vote of the union membership. |
| District council                                 | An organization made up of local unions in a geographical area that belong to the same international union. This council may coordinate bargaining with different employers in the area, or bargaining involving scattered locals having the same employer.   |
| Executive board                                  | The officers who run a local union, district council, or other labor body. On the local level, the executive board is normally elected by the membership. The board typically includes a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and trustees.   |
| Grievance  | A written complaint by employees or the union that the employer has violated the contract. Grievances are processed through the grievance procedure. The last step of the grievance procedure is usually arbitration, in which a neutral party makes a binding decision.  |
| International union                              | A large national organization comprised of affiliated local unions in a given industry or in a certain kind of occupation. Most unions in the United States are called "internationals" because they may also represent workers in Canada.  |
| Local union                                      | The basic unit of union organization. A local union has its own bylaws and elected officials. Its jurisdiction may be just one workplace or hundreds, one occupation or many. Local unions may also be called "chapters" or "lodges." Most are affiliated with one of the large international unions.   |
| National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)            | An agency of the U.S. government that enforces the Wagner Act and Taft-Hartley Act, which are the basic federal labor relations laws. The Wagner Act is often called the National Labor Relations Act. The NLRB conducts most private-sector certification elections. It decides unfair labor practice charges, including safety-related discharges, failure to provide information, and other safety issues.   |
| Organizer  | Organizers may be rank-and-file members or paid union staff members. They work to expand membership in the union.   |
| Steward  | The first-line officer of a local union. Stewards are usually rank-and-file workers, elected by union members in a workplace. When workers have complaints or grievances, they usually go first to the steward. In most locals, there is a chief steward and the stewards may constitute a stewards' council.   |
| Unfair labor practice                            | Action by either an employer or union that violates certain provisions of the labor relations laws, such as refusal to bargain in good faith or retaliation against a worker for union activity.  |
| Union representative (business agent)            | Many local unions and councils have their own paid staff members. These union representatives (business agents) perform day-to-day activities of the union, represent members, and help enforce the contract.   |

Source: Adapted from: Flagler JL. The labor movement in the United States. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 1990.



**Box 32-2.** Names of Major Unions

Unions are generally known by their initials. These can appear to be an overwhelming alphabet soup. However, nearly two-thirds of all U.S. union members belong to one of the ten largest international unions, listed below in order of size (as of 2007). For information about their mission and membership, see the following Web sites:

NEA—National Education Association. <http://www.nea.org>

SEIU—Service Employees International Union. <http://www.seiu.org>

AFSCME—American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. <http://www.afscme.org>

IBT—International Brotherhood of Teamsters. <http://www.teamster.org>

UFCW—United Food and Commercial Workers. <http://www.ufcw.org>

AFT—American Federation of Teachers. <http://www.aft.org>

USW—United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union. <http://www.usw.org>

IBEW—International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. <http://www.ibew.org>

LIUNA—Laborers' International Union of North America. <http://www.liuna.org>

IAMAW—International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. <http://www.goiam.org>



**Figure 32-3.** Protest by union members that was part of the movement that led to the passage of the black lung legislation (Coal Mine Safety and Health Act) in 1969. (Photograph by Earl Dotter.)

advocating for equal access to health and safety training and OSHA services. For example, they argue that training programs, publications, and complaint processes should take into account workers' own languages and cultures. Unions have also pushed for new protections against

hazards of particular concern to low-wage workers, such as workplace violence, ergonomic hazards, and pesticide exposure. Some unions are now establishing alliances with community organizations that serve immigrant and low-wage workers. For example, unions have joined forces with community groups in campaigns to demand a *living wage* rather than just a *minimum wage*.

Some unions have also helped launch alternative *worker centers* to reach out to underserved workers who are not yet unionized. For example, the Teamsters sponsor the Citizenship Project, a community-based immigrant and workers' rights center in California's Salinas Valley. It offers an array of immigration and naturalization services and other rights-related assistance to agricultural and other workers.

In recent years, some community groups and/or faith-based organizations have created their own worker centers independent of unions. Those centers sometimes take the initiative to address worker health and safety through advocacy, support, and education in the community. For example, the Workplace Project, a center in Long Island, New York, grew out of the struggles of Latino immigrants to respond to nonpayment or underpayment of wages, high rates of workplace injuries, job loss, and other workplace issues. The center has created worker committees for factory workers, day laborers, women working in child care and house cleaning, and maintenance workers. It also offers classes in labor history, health and safety, workers' compensation, organizing, and immigrant and

workers' rights. Recognizing the importance of these community-based centers, in 2006, the AFL-CIO entered into a partnership with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) to promote workers' rights and improve working conditions for all union and nonunion workers, regardless of their immigration status.

### **A UNION APPROACH TO OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY**

In 1911, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company on New York's Lower East Side. About 150 employees, almost all of them young immigrant women and girls, perished when the fire swept through the upper floors of the loft building in which they worked. Many burned to death; others jumped and died. The safety exits on the burning floors had been securely locked, allegedly to prevent "loss of goods." The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), along with the rest of organized labor in New York City and around the country, led an outraged response to the tragedy. A state factory investigation committee was formed and paved the way for many long-needed reforms in industrial safety, fire prevention, and child labor protection.<sup>7</sup>

Since the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, U.S. unions have continued to promote worker health and safety through a combination of political action, collective bargaining, technical assistance, and worker education.

#### **Political Action**

Unions lobbied throughout the twentieth century for national health and safety standards. By the 1960s, increased interest in occupational safety and health was supported by two parallel political movements. The environmental movement began to question the long-term effects of chemicals on health. The civil rights movement made individuals more aware of their rights. These movements created a climate of reform, which encouraged unions and individual workers

and others to advocate for new health and safety laws.

In 1968, labor leaders worked with President Lyndon Johnson's office to propose a government agency to develop and enforce comprehensive national workplace health and safety regulations. A mining disaster that year in Farmington, West Virginia, in which 78 miners died, gave impetus to this campaign. As a result of this tragedy and the advocacy of the United Mine Workers union, the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act was passed in 1969. The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) was passed in 1970, extending health and safety rights to nearly all U.S. workers. (The Act excludes those who are self employed, family members working on family farms, workers whose working conditions are covered by other federal agencies, and state and local employees, unless they are covered by their own state OSHA plans.<sup>8</sup>) (See Chapter 30.)

Unions advocate for laws and regulations (standards) that affect wages, hours, and working conditions, including health and safety. International unions have petitioned for OSHA regulations on critical issues, such as bloodborne pathogen exposure, ergonomic hazards, fall protection, and heat-related illness. Proposed OSHA standards are almost always intensely debated at public hearings, in the media, and elsewhere. When adopted, regulations are usually the direct result of concerted union advocacy that has been countered by rigorous opposition from business and industry organizations. Unions mobilize their members to lobby and provide testimony at hearings on proposed OSHA standards, generally giving voice to both organized and unorganized workers' concerns.

#### **Collective Bargaining/Representation**

Unions bargain directly with employers for comprehensive agreements aimed at improving working conditions, including health and safety (Box 32-3). This can include (a) health and safety committees or representatives, (b) the right to refuse unsafe work, (c) improvements in the workplace environment, (d) personal protective equipment, and (e) special safety grievance procedures. Some unions also negotiate for the right of access to employer facilities to

investigate hazards and for the right to accompany government or company personnel when they conduct safety inspections, surveys, and monitoring (Fig. 32-4). When health and safety clauses are included in the contract, unions have a tool for addressing workplace hazards immediately through existing means of contract enforcement, rather than depending on OSHA. The collective bargaining agreement also can address hazards not yet covered by OSHA standards, or fill in the gaps where current standards are inadequate.

Unions also have negotiated for a greater role in occupational health research. For example, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union in San Francisco incorporated language about joint labor-management health studies into its contract with the Hotel Multi-Employer Group. The language of the contract allows either party to request a study to assess workstations, workloads, ergonomic issues, and other health and safety problems. The contract calls for joint design of such studies, shared costs, and mutual agreement on researchers and recommendations. Similarly, many of the most important studies of hazards in the auto industry

have been conducted as a result of contract language negotiated by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Effective enforcement of the union contract is just as important as contract language. Unions and their members need to monitor workplaces and to see whether health and safety agreements are being kept. Typically, a worker or union can file a grievance if a violation of the contract is perceived. By including in the union contract a “general duty clause” regarding health and safety in the workplace, a grievance can be filed about almost any unsafe practice or condition. Such a clause states that the employer has a duty to keep the workplace safe.

Besides contract bargaining and enforcement, unions represent members’ health and safety concerns in a number of other ways. These can include filing complaints with OSHA or other agencies, organizing direct actions, and mobilizing public support through the media.

## Education and Assistance

Unions conduct numerous training programs for their members. Many unions have developed

### Box 32-3. Sample Health and Safety Contract Language

#### General Duty to Protect

The Company is committed to providing a safe and healthy work environment and encourages the active involvement and support of all employees. To achieve this end, the Company will do the following:

- Establish responsibilities of all levels of management and hold them accountable for implementing programs and procedures
- Ensure through proper support and training that all employees are aware of hazards and accept responsibility for working safely
- Ensure that all operations conduct business in compliance with applicable safety and health laws and regulations

#### Committees

The Parties shall maintain occupational safety and health committees at the national, regional, and establishment levels....Written minutes of each meeting will be maintained and distributed to each committee member and made available to employees upon request.

#### Research/Studies

Joint studies: At either party’s request, a study may be initiated to review workstations, ergonomics of jobs, and other health and safety issues in a particular department. Such a study shall be jointly designed by the parties and conducted by a mutually agreeable expert(s) in the area of occupational health issues. The cost for such a study shall either be equally borne by the parties or funded by other sources, such as foundations or other grants. All implementation issues and recommendations resulting from said study shall be resolved only by mutual agreement of the parties.

#### Training

Procedures addressing violence in the workplace shall be published and distributed. The School District and the American Federation of Teachers shall be responsible for providing an education and training program. Clerical/technical unit employees shall attend the initial training and shall receive appropriate release time for this and subsequent training. The School District and the American Federation of Teachers shall develop procedures for training new employees.

Source: Adapted from: Collective bargaining for health and safety—a handbook for unions. Berkeley, CA: Labor Occupational Health Program, 2000.





**Figure 32-4.** The City Center Project in Las Vegas, where the Building Trades Union negotiated for access to investigate and address the high mortality rate among construction workers. (Photograph by Barry S. Levy.)

training manuals, videos, and fact sheets on a wide range of health and safety topics. Some have received funding from federal agencies, such as OSHA or the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), to train members about specific issues, such as noise, ionizing radiation, construction safety, ergonomics, hazardous waste, and health care hazards.

Worker training is required under many federal and state health and safety regulations. This is generally the employer's responsibility. However, some union contracts make clear what training the employer and the union must each provide, and how training must be provided. For example, several Canadian Auto Workers contracts specify that union members will deliver all education and training for employees. These members attend 2-week instructor training programs provided by the Canadian Workers Health and Safety Center, funded by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario, to prepare them to assume this training role.<sup>9</sup>

Unions also provide technical assistance to members facing hazards. Some international

unions and larger regional bodies have health and safety departments with professional staff, such as industrial hygienists or nurses. Many local unions also work with committees on occupational safety and health (COSH groups)—local coalitions of union members, occupational health and safety professionals, lawyers, and students throughout the United States. They provide advice, training, support, and sometimes materials and equipment. University programs, government agencies, and occupational health clinics also provide technical support to unions and their members, as well as to unorganized workers. (See Box 32-4.)

### **Applying Union Principles to Health and Safety**

Whether through political action, collective bargaining, other forms of representation, or educational programs, unions are guided in their health and safety activities by several basic principles that are the cornerstone of the labor approach to health and safety. The most



**Box 32-4.** Advocating for Healthy Jobs

Unions have recognized that a healthy job is more than one without hazards that cause injury or illness. It must support a full, productive, and healthy life. Americans spend nearly half of their waking hours at work. The work environment affects workers and their communities in profound ways, impacting stress levels, health care options, emotional well-being, and family life. Many unions push for policies and benefits that support healthy jobs in a broader sense. For example, the Labor Project for Working Families is a coalition of labor and community groups that had successfully lobbied for policies that guarantee paid family leave for all workers in California. Both the AFL-CIO and Change to Win Coalition have placed universal health care at the top of their agendas.

Healthy jobs are those that do the following:

1. Protect against workplace hazards
2. Provide living wages and benefits
3. Limit excessive stress and workload
4. Respect human dignity on the job and are free of harassment and discrimination
5. Offer job security
6. Support healthy lifestyles
7. Support family life
8. Support communities by being environmentally responsible

*Source:* Labor Occupational Health Program. Healthy jobs call to action. Berkeley: Labor Occupational Health Program, Center for Occupational and Environmental Health, University of California at Berkeley, 2009.

fundamental principle is a commitment to preserving, expanding, and defending workers' rights. These principles are listed in the sections that follow.

### The Right to Protection

Unions advocate for safety programs that identify and effectively control hazards. They generally oppose programs that blame workers for injuries and illnesses. Instead of emphasizing unsafe acts, unions demand safe working conditions. They insist on recognition of the fundamental principle of the OSH Act: Employers are responsible for providing a safe and healthful workplace. This principle means that workers have a right to be protected from hazards.

Similarly, unions advocate for the most protective solutions to problems. These usually eliminate hazards at their source, rather than relying on personal protective equipment used by individual workers. For example, eliminating the use of toxic chemicals or installing effective ventilation is preferable, where possible, to relying on the individual use of respirators that are fallible and uncomfortable.

The right to protection also means that workplaces must institute effective injury and illness prevention programs, including such elements as the following: (a) systems to identify and control hazards in a timely manner; (b) training of all workers on potential hazards they face and skills they need to participate in health and safety activities; and (c) mechanisms that allow workers to report symptoms, injuries, and potential hazards without fear of reprisal.

When prevention measures fail and workers are injured, unions advocate for timely medical care, compensation for any lost wages, and appropriate return-to-work policies.

### The Right to Participate and Act

Unions advocate for the right of workers to participate fully in all aspects of workplace health and safety programs. They also support worker participation in the development and implementation of local, state, and national policies. Worker and union participation takes many forms, including the following: joint labor-management health and safety committees in which unions have equal membership, equal control of the agenda, and an equal leadership role; opportunities for input on new equipment and technology; and a role in setting research agendas and in reviewing and analyzing resulting data.<sup>8</sup> To ensure their ability to participate fully in health and safety activities, workers need an environment in which they can voice concerns and advocate for change without fear of reprisals. To this end, unions have pushed for strong anti-discrimination provisions and strict "whistleblower" protections in both laws and collective bargaining agreements. In addition, unions have fought for the right of workers to refuse hazardous work and have battled to protect and defend workers who exercise this right from discrimination.

### The Right to Know

To participate on a full and equal footing with management, workers need access to all relevant

information about the hazards they face on the job. Unions successfully fought for an OSHA Hazard Communication (“right to know”) standard that gives workers access to material safety data sheets (MSDSs) that provide information on specific chemicals, chemical labels, records of exposure and medical monitoring, logs of workplace injuries and illnesses, and training about various types of hazards.

Some unions have gone further to demand that workers have the right to understand the information they are given. This right to understand means that information and training must be presented in ways that are accessible to all workers, and that methods and materials must be adapted to take into account differences in language, literacy, culture, and technical expertise.<sup>10</sup> This right is particularly critical given the growing numbers of non-English-speaking workers in the United States, many of whom work in the most dangerous jobs.

### **A UNION APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

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In October 1948, an industrial suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was enveloped in a “killer smog”—the worst recorded industrial air pollution accident in U.S. history. Stagnant air conditions trapped emissions in the town of Donora from a local zinc works and a steel mill. Over a 5-day period, more than 20 people died and thousands more became ill due to sulfur dioxide, zinc, cadmium, and other contaminants in the thick smog. The United Steelworkers union, which represented workers from the mill, joined others in demanding that the two companies be held accountable for poisoning their members and others in the community.<sup>11</sup>

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This incident marked the beginning of the U.S. labor movement’s involvement in environmental advocacy, long before the rise of the popular environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Unions became involved in advocacy not only for clean air and water but also for conservation measures, such as preservation of wilderness areas for the enjoyment of the working population that had increasing leisure time.

Despite its early adoption of environmental principles, labor has a mixed history in working for environmental health, as described in the next section.

### **Labor Pioneers in Environmental Health**

By fighting for the elimination or reduction of hazardous chemicals in the workplace, unions contribute to the protection of the surrounding environment. Workers want a safe, clean environment not just in the workplace but also where they live, play, and send their children to school. As a result, unions have put their political clout behind some important battles for environmental protection. For example, in 1972—just 2 years after labor won the fight for the OSH Act, it helped win passage of the Clean Water Act amendments.

Walter Reuther, president of the UAW, was an early advocate for the environment. Under his leadership, the union created a Department of Conservation and Resource Development in 1967, predating the first Earth Day 3 years later. The UAW lobbied for legislation to control disposal of toxic waste, promote recycling, and establish a national environmental policy.

Tony Mazzocchi, a leader of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW), like Walter Reuther, was a leading labor advocate for environmental protection. The OCAW argued for regulatory protection of the environment, even though its members were among the most vulnerable to job displacement due to new environmental restrictions. He led OCAW to take a visionary role in recognizing the potential catastrophe of leaving environmental pollution unchecked.

Another early leader in labor’s advocacy for environmental health was Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). The UFW led campaigns, beginning in the 1960s, to raise awareness of the hazards of pesticides used on food crops. It built a successful alliance to fight for pesticide protection for both consumers and workers (Fig. 32-5).

### **Jobs versus the Environment**

As the post–World War II years of economic growth and security gave way to the economic



**Figure 32-5.** Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers Union, leading a campaign to protect farmworkers from the health hazards of pesticides. (Photograph by Earl Dotter.)

decline of the 1980s, tensions between organized labor and the environmental movement grew. Advocacy for environmental protection was increasingly perceived by labor as a threat to union jobs, which already were declining at an alarming rate. In some situations, union jobs were lost as older, environmentally damaging companies went out of business, with little or no concern for displaced workers. In other situations, however, the threat of plant closures was used by companies to enlist labor support in a fight against environmental control. Claims by businesses and industries that regulation would cost jobs were exaggerated or false.<sup>12,13</sup>

As a result of well-publicized conflicts, such as the “timber wars” in the Northwest between loggers and environmental activists, the labor movement developed a reputation for being anti-environmentalist. Similarly, many workers came to view the environmental movement as anti-labor and uncaring about workers. Public opinion generally held that labor would always side with business and industry against environmental protection and in favor of jobs. However, even in the 1980s, the labor movement was never monolithic concerning policies on environmental protection. Those sectors of the labor

movement that felt directly threatened by job loss soon learned that, in any event, they were losing jobs to international competition. As a result, a renewed era of labor–environmental collaboration began to develop.

### New Alliances

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, strife between the labor and environmental movements started to fade. One survey found that 64% of union leaders in the United States reported their relationships with environmentalists as “good” or “very good”; only 10% identified their relationships as “poor” or “very bad.” The worst relations were found in regions, such as the Northwest, where the timber industry is a dominant employer. Elsewhere, labor leaders expressed deep commitment to common concerns with the environmental movement, including restricting use of toxic chemicals, protecting air and water quality, and incorporating environmental standards into international trade agreements.<sup>14</sup>

Important new alliances have been built on the premise of a “just transition” from polluting industries to environmentally friendly jobs.

Beginning in 1996, a coalition of environmental and economic-justice organizations and the OCAW came together to promote dialogue between communities of color affected by polluting industries and workers who rely on those industries for their jobs. This exchange of concerns led to the establishment of the Just Transition Alliance, which promotes policies in local communities to address conflicts between (a) maintaining and creating jobs, and (b) promoting a clean environment.

“Just transition” principles state that the costs of achieving sustainable development, a healthy economy, and a clean environment should not be borne by workers or by community residents. These principles call for compensation and other reparations, including re-education and training, for both workers and community residents impacted by polluting industries or by the closing of these industries.<sup>15</sup>

More “blue-green” alliances are taking shape, many of them joining in the call for “just transition.” These alliances often call for placing equal emphasis on policies that will do the following:

- Protect health of workers
- Protect health of community residents
- Promote sustainable, environmentally friendly employment
- Preserve union representation, maintenance of living standards, workplace safety, and decent working conditions in newly created jobs that replace jobs in polluting industries

Perhaps the most publicized coalitions of labor unions and environmental organizations have been in the area of international trade agreements. Unions and environmental organizations have jointly advocated for the inclusion and enforcement of trade sanctions in such agreements to ensure that global competitors in developing countries maintain adequate standards to protect workers and the environment. At a meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999, environmentalists arrived in turtle costumes to protest the WTO ruling against the U.S. Sea Turtle Conservation Act. They marched side by side with many members of labor unions, including the Teamsters

union. The news media described the coalition as “turtles and teamsters.”<sup>16</sup>

## A Green Economy

Alliances among labor and environmental advocates have developed in a variety of fields, including urban development, land use, and energy policy. Construction unions and environmentalists have found common ground by fighting for “smart-growth,” rather than “no-growth,” policies. “No-growth” policies refer to those that favor limiting any development or expansion in order to support sustainable communities. “Smart-growth” policies advocate for development that avoids urban sprawl, focuses on building in the city center, and promotes sustainable practices in public transportation, housing, jobs, and natural resources preservation.

By jointly advocating for development in already urbanized areas, these alliances have promoted both union construction jobs and control of the health hazards associated with urban sprawl. These hazards include air pollution, heat, motor vehicle crashes, reduced physical activity, decreased water quality, pedestrian injuries and fatalities, and decreased mental health.<sup>17</sup> (See Chapter 39.)

Similarly, the Apollo Alliance has put forward a national sustainable energy policy that would create new high-wage, high-skilled jobs promoting environmental health, or “green-collar jobs.” In developing this policy for a more sustainable future, a coalition of top leaders of the labor and environmental movements have joined forces to call for investment in energy-efficient buildings and technologies, such as hybrid cars and solar-powered buildings, and to decrease dependence on oil. Since the beginning of a global economic recession in 2007, even more interest has grown in the creation of “green jobs” to try to stimulate the economy. The labor movement has dedicated significant resources to this cause, such as the AFL-CIO “Center for Green Jobs.”<sup>18</sup> The Center assists union leaders in training workers for new careers in a clean-energy economy, educating union members about public policy issues, and providing guidance on training opportunities for green jobs. For example, the Center is exploring opportunities for labor organizations to support projects that create clean



fuels and ultra-efficient vehicles, revitalize manufacturing and rebuild downtown areas in cities, launch “clean-coal” technology, and build a “smarter” electric power grid.

One premise of these alliances is that environmental health advocates who wish to collaborate with the labor movement must address the issue of jobs. At the same time, labor advocates must be more consistent in opposing “job blackmail” (or “job fear”), which can undermine their defense of environmental health. Unions must be committed to countering employers who threaten to move jobs because of environmental regulation. Not only does labor benefit by finding important allies for workers’ rights in the environmental movement; it also helps create both sustainable jobs and cleaner, safer community environments for its members. (See Chapter 33.)

### TEN TIPS FOR WORKING WITH UNIONS

The first steps toward working effectively with labor unions are understanding both the basic structure and functions of unions and learning about the history of labor’s involvement with occupational and environmental health. Much can be learned from the experience of other professionals who have worked with unions. The following are 10 tips for working with unions, based on advice from practicing public health professionals and others.<sup>8,19</sup>

*1. Involve the union in your work in as many ways as possible.* Unions can be important allies in your efforts to improve health and safety in the workplace and the community. You will avoid difficulties, and gain substantial insight, by working with the union from the start.

Hearing from the unions gives me a complete, more balanced view of the reality of the workplace. Just hearing from management won’t give you the whole picture. You need to hear from the “shop floor.” It allows me to propose interventions that are likely to work in the real world. (A National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH] researcher)

*2. Do not be surprised if a union takes an adversarial stance.* It is the job of the union to advocate for its members.

Sometimes I can be frustrated when the union takes a very tough stand. But I have to remind myself that without its support we would have no health and safety regulations, we would have no health and safety programs, we would have no jobs in this field. (An industrial hygienist)

*3. Educate yourself about labor.* Find out which unions represent the workers with whom you interact. Learn about the union structure. Who are the elected officials, paid staff, executive board members, and shop stewards? Does the union have a designated safety representative? Does it have a community services department? Find out with whom you should communicate. In addition to your local union contacts, many labor unions have staff at national levels who specialize in safety and health. Get to know your union contacts and find out their concerns. Be proactive.

It can be complicated working with unions, knowing who to go to for what. You have to get to know the players. When do you need to talk to elected leaders? When do you want staff and when do you want the steward? When is it a good idea to talk with the international union and when would it be stepping on toes? If I’m not sure, I ask. (A community organizer)

*4. Show respect for union leadership.* Unions have hierarchies, just like other institutions. Go through proper channels. While you may have good informal contacts with individual union members, be sure to make official requests through the elected leadership.

Despite all of the stereotypes about “big business and big unions,” unions are actually one of the few democratic institutions around. Local leaders are elected by the grassroots. It is important to respect these elected leaders. (A union health and safety director)

*5. Get to know the rank-and-file membership of the union.* While it is important to get the “buy-in” of the union leadership, it is also important to hear directly from the workers. Ask questions and listen carefully.

Sometimes I can’t understand a position the union is taking. But if I get out and see for myself and talk with folks, I might understand it better. And sometimes I might get my own point of view across. Someone is always more open to your point of view if you show you are listening, too. (An environmental activist)

6. *Visit the workplace.* Tour the workplace with a union guide. Arrange to “shadow” a worker through the work day. There is no substitute for seeing working conditions firsthand.

You think you know what the hazards are in a particular industry, but I guarantee that the reality will blow you away! (A public health student)

7. *Get to know the collective bargaining agreement at the workplace.* Find out what the provisions are for health and safety. Does the contract call for joint labor-management health and safety committees? How are safety and health grievances handled? Are there training or other requirements that go above and beyond what OSHA requires?

Read the union contract. Work with it — it is just as important as what is spelled out in OSHA regulations. (A company safety director)

8. *Share information with the union.* Keep the union fully informed about the results of all occupational and environmental health investigations. Arrange for union participation in research projects and work with the union to notify workers of the results.

We did a cancer study of our workforce. We had an advisory committee of experts, but, even more importantly, we involved the union. It played a critical role all the way through the process, from designing the study to keeping the workers informed. (An occupational medicine physician)

9. *Understand that unions have competing priorities.* Health and safety may be important, but so are organizing, negotiating the union contract, representing members, mobilizing politically around local and national elections, and holding union elections. The union may not always be able to work with you on your timetable. Be flexible.

I have learned to expect the unexpected. Just because we have a deadline for our research doesn't mean the union can get to our agenda on our timetable. Most people who work for unions are working long and hard hours, under enormous pressure. If there is a strike, an election, a crisis, then we have to be prepared to wait. (A university researcher)

10. *Establish your credibility.* If you are an outsider or newcomer, you may be viewed with suspicion until you are known to be a steadfast, ethical advocate for health and safety. Never compromise your integrity.

Make sure the union knows you as a credible professional who is open to hearing concerns, will follow through, and will speak out honestly for health and safety. Go out on a limb. Be a real advocate for health and safety. Establish your track record. (An occupational health nurse)

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## FURTHER READING

- Center for Construction Research and Training. Available at: <http://www.cpwrr.com>  
*A Web site of the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO. Has useful information about the building trades union and their work for health and safety. Also provides links to the Center for Construction Research and Training electronic library of information on construction hazards, el COSH.*
- Delp L, Ottman-Kramer M, Schurman S, Wong K. Teaching for change: popular education and the labor movement. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education and George Meany Center for Labor Studies/The National Labor College, 2002.  
*A collection of articles about the role of popular education. Includes several examples of creative union activities in occupational and environmental health, including participatory research with hotel room cleaners, using theater for worker health and safety, and the activities of the Just Transition Alliance.*
- Good Jobs First. High road or low road? Job quality in the new green economy. 2009. Available at: <http://www.goodjobsfirst.org> <http://www.aflcio.org> and <http://www.changetowin.org>.  
*Union Web sites with useful information about the U.S. labor movement and advocacy for health and safety.*
- Just Transition Alliance. Available at: <http://www.jtalliance.org>  
*Addressing collaborative efforts of labor and environmental justice advocates.*
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*A practical “how to” resource guide for unions and community groups advocating for worker protection. Contains multiple “real life” examples of union approaches to health and safety.*
- New Jersey Work Enforcement Council. Available at: <http://www.njwec.org>  
*A pioneer in organizing grassroots campaigns to help labor and environmental movements speak with a unified voice.*
- New York Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH). Available at: <http://www.nycosh.org>  
*In addition to news on developments in New York State, the site provides useful nationwide resources on a wide range of health and safety topics. Links available to all of the other COSH groups in the United States.*