Protecting the environment and protecting jobs is the just way to go

So asbestos has to go, PVC is too damaging to the environment and CFCs must no longer wreck ozone layer. Maybe, says Robert E. Wages, President of the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers International Union - but there should be a Just Transition to protects the environment, jobs and communities.

No matter what the media say, these are not boom times for working Americans. Although company profits are soaring, the hope of stable, lifetime employment is a thing of the past for most workers. Giant corporations are shipping jobs around the globe in a breakneck search for the cheapest labor, and they are simultaneously slashing other jobs because of costs associated with new environmental regulations.

Moreover, the spectre of job dislocation — a.k.a. job destruction — has led to a pervasive sense of insecurity among many working Americans.

In fact, since passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and as the federal government enact more stringent laws regulating the use and manufacture of toxic substances, many workers and communities have been ravaged by massive layoffs. Making matters worse, conflict often erupts when companies threaten plant closings. When the threat involves moving jobs to Mexico, Malaysia or elsewhere overseas, friction can develop between union and non-union workers, or between workers and the community. “Keep jobs at home. Say no to the union.”

When the threat involves the phaseout or ban of a toxic substance, dissenion can break out between environmentalists intent on preventing pollution and workers clinging to their toxic-dependent jobs. “Jobs don’t grow on trees.”

The result is that natural allies like organized labor, environmentalists and community activists have often clashed instead of uniting against corporations that are blackmailing workers with the threat of dislocation.

Removing toxics

The production, use and disposal of chlorinated chemicals is now being challenged by regulatory, legal and citizen actions around the world, says Gary Cohen in Global Pesticide Campaigner. “Such actions are likely to increase in coming years as additional data about chlorine’s widespread environmental, occupational and public health impacts become more widely discussed. “The time is ripe for a broad alliance of the environmental health, environmental justice and labour movements to push for the elimination of chlorinated chemicals, at the same time ensuring just transition for workers and communities dependent on chlorinated chemical production.”

“There is an emerging intellectual and policy framework for addressing toxic chemical threats that represents a dramatic departure from the pollution control strategy that the US government has pursued for the last 25 years. “This new framework has four components: pollution prevention instead of pollution control; the precautionary principle as a new methodology for decision making, the end of individual risk assessment and democratic control over product decisions.”

There are initiatives happening on an international and national levels aimed at restricting the production, use and dangerous disposal of chlorinated chemicals. “These efforts are likely to increase over the next decade due to a combination of escalating health effects, new research on endocrine disruption and vigorous broad based citizen action campaigns.”

“We must develop a broad alliance working for these changes that includes environmental health and justice forces and labour to push for a transition away from a toxic, chemically-addicted economy to a saner, healthier, more sustainable world.”

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