

# We are better than dirt

**Jobs are in jeopardy. Efforts to plug the ozone layer put coal on the back burner. Jobs producing CFCs are off into the stratosphere. But for workers in polluting industries, it's not all bad - unions have a plan to ensure it's the problem and not the workforce that is dumped. Rory O'Neill reports.**

**T**hroughout the industrial world old, polluting industries are dying. Consumer boycotts, toxics reduction policies, media campaigns, informed and active consumers and victims' organisations and legal worries are putting pressure on the environmentally unfriendly to close up shop.

Harsh lessons are being learned, too late for some. The BSE fiasco, a government-industry alliance in defence of suspect beef, cost a staggering £27m in investigation costs alone, left the industry on the ropes and much of its workforce down and out.

Failure to act can be financial and industrial suicide. Unions now know that caving in to "greenmail" - the employer threat that you should keep quiet on the hazards or your job will go - rarely protected jobs, if at all.

The coal industry barely exists, the Tories work finished off by the global pollution pact, the Kyoto Protocol (*Hazards* 66). Asbestos has gone, all but banned across Europe. CFCs, once a big chemical industry employer in the UK but also major "greenhouse gases", were banned globally by the Montreal Protocol.

And consumer pressure has caused sales slumps in

products from stainless steel (*Hazards* 60) to some solvents.

Unions, of course, must defend jobs. Unemployment is just about the only thing worse for you than an arduous, soul-destroying, polluted job. The challenge for unions is to protect lives, livelihoods and communities. A new, two-pronged union strategy is emerging: support for a long-term policy to create sustainable jobs; and a short-term strategy to ensure the workforce experiences a "Just Transition" to the new jobs (*Hazards* 63).

A 1999 policy document from the Canadian union federation CLC calls for "a sustainable economy, sustainable employment, sustainable production and the public services that support it..."

"All these modes of sustainability embody the idea of durability: long-lasting quality jobs; production processes that are safe, healthy and stress-free; and durable products, in a social environment that will not succumb to resource exhaustion, gross pollution, non-renewable energy sources and endemic waste."

But today's measures to "go green" frequently take little account of human impact. Tony Mazzocchi, the US union leader credited by many with starting the Just

Transition debate, noted that more resources were allocated to cleaning up toxic sites than to the workers left in devastated, jobless communities. "They were going to treat dirt better than workers," he commented.

A 1999 article in the US *Sierra* magazine said: "Mazzocchi envisioned a government-established fund that would provide full wages and benefits plus tuition costs for displaced workers for up to four years of school [vocational or other study], plus aid in relocating to a new job. The fund, directed by government, industry, labour, community and environmental representatives, could also provide low-interest loans and technical assistance to develop alternative technologies and jobs for displaced workers. Taxes on products being phased out, such as chlorinated chemicals or fuels contributing to global warming, would provide financing."

This is not the only funding option. Throughout the industrial world, there are measures to limit the impact of industrial decline. The European Union pays billions each year through its "Structural Funds" in an effort to retrain displaced workers and regenerate economically declining industrial areas.

It shouldn't be too big a leap of the imagination to channel some of these funds in a more positive way, to anticipate the closure of polluting and toxic industries and their replacement with sustainable alternatives and jobs.

Investment in sustainable jobs can and has rescued declining industrial areas (*Hazards* 66).

The most ambitious plan, the US GI Bill, created to retrain 17 million US soldiers returning from World War II, was described by one US union leader "as the best manpower investment the US ever made." A 1998 congressional study found that for every dollar invested, six dollars were returned to the economy.

Just Transition is now a central plank of union environmental policy in the US and Canada. Echoes can be seen in policies developed by European unions.

The European Trade Union Confederation's new policy paper, *Modern sustainable job creation*, suggests the following measures:

- ◆ The promotion of new and cleaner technology, for example through taxation and other measures;
- ◆ The introduction of an eco-label for clean production;
- ◆ The development of eco-efficiency indicators;
- ◆ Support for the research and development of new and cleaner technology;
- ◆ A reduction in the obstacles for entrepreneurs developing environmental technology;
- ◆ Provision of targeted training for eco-entrepreneurs and self-employed;
- ◆ Provision of training and know-how to employees concerning environment-friendly production;
- ◆ An increase in the participation of workers in the

introduction of new, cleaner technologies;

- ◆ An improvement in the knowledge in general of environment-friendly production;
- ◆ Adaptation of the organisation of work to environment-friendly production; and
- ◆ Further improvement of ecological management instruments like the European Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS).

But sustainable jobs and Just Transition policies have to come as a job lot, if there is going to be justice now and jobs tomorrow.

According to the Canadian unions' CLC: "Just transition cannot occur without an employment focused, macro-economic policy. Further, an essential pre-requisite for any effective Just Transition programme must be adequate and effective general employment adjustment policies and programmes, including unemployment insurance."

CLC adds: "This vision requires workers' participation and control over their own future. Otherwise, any environmental change will be incomplete and one-sided; it will benefit only the rich and privileged. Just Transition is essential to the process of environmental change. Many of our members work in jobs that will become obsolete if unsustainable production, environmental degradation and resource exhaustion are allowed to continue along their current path."

Getting from dirty to clean production is not a pipe dream; it does happen. Asbestos factories throughout Europe switched to production of safer alternatives, when they realised the terminal unpopularity of their deadly wares. The chemical industry produces alternative solvents. White goods and cars are increasingly produced from aluminium and other materials rather than cancer-suspect stainless steel (*Hazards 60*). And military factories have undergone the "swords to ploughshares" transition to civilian production.

But the switch will not always be easy. Governments vying for internal investment are engaged in an international ugly contest, at best putting a brake on environmental and safety improvements, at worse rolling back or turn a blind eye to hard fought-for controls.

And globalisation continues to gift enormous power to barely accountable institutions including the World Trade Organisation (WTO), with a responsibility to protect trade that can be backed-up with swingeing sanctions, even if environmental and safety laws have to be abandoned as a result. The WTO decision to allow asbestos bans (*Hazards 71*), may yet prove to be a rare exception.

This has to be a global union project or we'll have more of the global jobs shuffle, plummeting environmental standards and universal job insecurity. While Europe got rid of un-



**GOOD NEWS:** This New York Times ad announced that members of the US Steelworkers' Union and environmental groups had teamed up to form the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment (ASJE). You can join too. Details: ASJE, PO Box 3536, Eureka, CA 95502, USA. Web: [www.asje.org](http://www.asje.org)

wanted asbestos jobs, Brazil and South Africa found the same multinationals arguing that there was no alternative. It was a short-term lie to wring the last drops of profit out of asbestos.

Bob Wages of the US industrial union PACE says the challenge is real, but unavoidable: "It may sound unrealistic, but if anyone thinks that the shift to a global economy can take place without job dislocation or that profit-driven corporations will voluntarily create enough non-toxic jobs to go round, that is really unrealistic."

**References**

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**The think tank to thank**

The US union-backed Public Health Institute has been a key player in promoting Just Transition. Its Just Transition website summarises the approach as follows:

"Just Transition is a process to ameliorate the conflict between jobs and the environment. It brings organized labor, the traditional environmental community and the people of color environmental justice movement together to develop policies and relationships to avert clashes.

"Through a process of dialogue and common projects these groups are defining a policy of Just Transition that calls for financing a fair and equitable transition for workers and communities in environmentally sensitive industries as we necessarily move forwards towards more sustainable production."

Public Health Institute, 853 Broadway, Room 2014, New York, NY 10003, USA. PHI's Just Transition website includes useful press articles, policy documents and weblinks. [www.justtransition.org](http://www.justtransition.org)

[www.cep.ca/en/policies/915.htm](http://www.cep.ca/en/policies/915.htm)  
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