JUST TRANSITION

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 enacts 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, dissension 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 too often clashed instead of uniting against corporations that are blackmailing workers with the threat of dislocation.

That is why OCAW is forging a new partnership with a number of other unions, COSH groups, environmental justice organizations and community groups to fight for what we call a Just Transition.

This program proposes that workers who lose jobs due to international trade agreements or as a result of the environmental phaseout or ban of toxic substances should suffer no net loss of income.

In fact, none of them should be asked to pay a disproportionate tax — in the form of lost wages — to achieve societal goals concerning global trade or environmental regulation.

Nor should our communities suffer. Just Transition proposes support for communities during the dislocation process, including full compensation and reparations for damages, as well as quality health care.

Endorsed last summer by the delegates to OCAW's annual convention (see *WHIN* 53), Just Transition would require at least two years notification so that workers and communities have time to prepare for the upheaval that occurs when a company slashes jobs or pulls up stakes altogether.

It would also establish a special fund to provide dislocated workers with: Full wages and benefits until the worker retires or finds comparable employment; up to four years of tuition stipends to attend vocational schools or colleges — plus full income while in school; post-educational stipends or subsidies if no jobs at comparable wages are available after graduation; and relocation for displaced workers who choose to move for employment reasons.

The fund would receive revenues from a surcharge on the production of toxic substances targeted for elimination. It would also receive funding from a small corporate tax on international financial transactions.

To some, Just Transition may sound unrealistic, even pie in the sky. But there are precedents for this type of program. Fifty years ago we created The G.I. Bill, a tremendously successful transition program for 17 million soldiers returning from World War II.

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Then, as now, there weren't enough jobs to go around, and critics claimed the program — which provided a living wage and tuition — was too expensive. But it turned out to be perhaps the best manpower investment the US has ever made: a Congressional study in 1988 showed that for every dollar invested in the G.I. Bill, six dollars were returned to the economy.

In today's volatile political and economic climate, the need for a transition program for workers is just as acute. Recent research shows that the average dislocated chemical worker, for example, can expect to lose 50 per cent of his or her wages and benefits during the transition to other work.

Moreover, since 1988, nearly 2 million of the best jobs in the country have been destroyed, and more than 400,000 jobs have disappeared due to NAFTA.

Just Transition provides an alternative vision of social, economic and environmental justice. Rather than deny that widespread job displacement and damage to communities will continue to occur as a result of trade agreements and environmental regulation, Just Transition acknowledges that, like it or not, these policy decisions will inevitably cost jobs and harm the places where we live.

What Just Transition proposes is that any job loss must include a fair and equitable transition for workers and the communities we live in.

It may sound pie in the sky, but if anyone thinks that the shift in to a global economy can take place without job dislocation, or that profit-driven corporations will voluntarily generate enough decent non-toxic jobs to go around, that is really pie in the sky.

NYCOSH Safety Rep, US, Summer 1998

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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