

‘Blue-Green Alliances’: union capacities and prospects as environmental actors

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Abstract

The emergence of coalitions between unions and other organisations has become an increasing focus in academic and policy debate. Such alliances have been identified as a way for unions to revive and renew their sense of purpose while rebuilding their membership base. Social movement scholars in particular have often described these coalitions as a next stage in social movement development, suggesting a limited view of union focus and capacity. These two aspects of analysis have been illustrated with reference to the emergence of ‘blue-green alliances’ involving trade unions and environmental organisations. This paper considers the breadth and strength of these arguments by considering the activities of ‘blue-green alliances’ in Australia (with some reference to similar and more long-standing developments in the United States), the role of unions within and outside these coalitions and their capacities to serve as environmental actors. While recognizing the critical role that environmental organisations perform, the paper concludes that trade unions have capacities to address environmental matters beyond that of many environmental organisations. The implication is that the need to form coalitions with other organisations to perform this role effectively may not be theoretically or empirically accurate.

Keywords: Trade Unions, Union Renewal, Union-Environmental Coalitions

Unions have a long history of engaging with environmental concerns (Estabrook 2007). A core question is what capacities do unions have to engage in environmental matters and what are the constraints on those capacities? By answering these questions we might be able to better understand why unions struggle to be an effective voice on environmental matters and why coalitions with environmental organisations are often tenuous and short-lived. In recent years union activities around environmental matters have begun to take centre stage in political discourse (eg., Obach 2004 and Estabrook 2007). Media attention and public images of the ‘Teamsters’ and the ‘Turtles’ protesting together on the streets of Seattle during the

WTO meetings in November 1999 highlighted these developments (eg., Levi 2003). With this event there was a growing speculation that for significant change to occur on environmental or other social matters, coalitions of progressive social actors working together to bring about change is required.

Union decline in advanced capitalist states has been discussed extensively, pointing to threats to membership levels and the danger of a narrowing of interest and purpose (Fairbrother and Yates 2003). In this context arguments have been advanced about union renewal and revitalisation (Frege and Kelly 2003; Lopez 2004; and Voss and Sherman, 2003). One recent emphasis is that unions must reach out to the community, and reconstitute themselves as community unions (Tattersall 2006). Extending such analyses, our argument is that for unions to develop the capacity to address non-industrial matters, it may be desirable for unions to reach out to community-based and related organisations. However, this should not involve the subordination of unions to such alliances.

Debates

The debate about organized labour and the working environment takes two forms. There is a long history of research on the relationship between unions and the working environment, in particular drawing attention to health and safety, and related themes (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998; Kinnersly 1974; Nichols 1997; Quinlan 1998; Obach 2004; Gould *et al.*). Prominent in these accounts is the direct engagement by trade unions with public policy, emphasising the importance of regulation (Anderson and Quinlan 2008; James *et al.* 2007) and unions' complex relationships with employers over the working environment (Montrie 2008:123-27).

More broadly there is a body of literature that focuses on unions and environmental

organisations, part of debates about ‘old’ (trade unions) and ‘new’ (environmental bodies) social movements (Obach 2004). The theoretical base for this focus is provided by an analysis that begins from the proposition that waged workers are rooted in production relations, and along with employers they stand to gain from expanding or retaining manufacturing and associated capacities (Schnaiberg 1980; UNEP, 2007). The implication is that workers have an enduring interest in job protection. In the context of climate change, then workers and their unions have an economic interest in taking defensive stances in relation to policies to address the stark possibilities that may arise from climate change.

Recently, there has been much debate about union capacity building. Lévesque and Murray (2002) develop a three point model, focusing on internal solidarity, external solidarity, and proactive initiatives. The focus on capacity building is complemented by debate about the development of alliances between unions and community groups – environmental and non-governmental organisations (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998; Obach 2004; Turner 2006; and Tattersall 2006 and 2007). It is argued that such alliances or coalitions lead to a situation where unions become embedded in the community in ways that are new and novel. However, it is also the case that issues are framed as matters of contention in relation to constituency and organisational form, as well as in relation to the subject. For climate change this can result in a union focus (localized and immediate) and another focus (universal and long-term). Forging an accommodation in such circumstances is not straightforward.

These debates lead to three questions:

1. How significant are coalitions for union renewal?
2. Do coalitions strengthen union capacity to act on non-industrial matters, such as environmental concerns?

3. What are the limits to such developments?

The analysis here considers the ways Australian unions may be reaching out to a range of groups on environmental or 'green' matters.

The Australian Experience

In Australia, union involvement in environmental matters came to the forefront in the early 1970s when the Builders Labourers Federation used Green Bans to preserve the built and natural environment from unsustainable development in and around Sydney (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998). The use of 'green bans' were extended throughout the 1970s as a way to influence public policy. As part of the anti-nuclear movement, for example, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) banned the mining, handling and export of uranium in 1976 and the Maritime Union of Australia extended these bans to include French nuclear testing in the South Pacific and the dumping of toxic waste (MUA 2008).

Since taking office the Rudd Government has signalled a commitment to address climate change through a range of policy approaches. One of the most significant measures has been to set a carbon emissions reduction target of between 5-15% by 2020 through its Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) – a type of Emission Trading Scheme. This target is expected to present some real challenges for Emission-Intensive Trade Exposed (EITE) industries when implemented (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). Smelters, coal powered electricity generators, paper mills and other heavy manufacturing industries, which have served as the heartland for union membership for decades, have raised concerns about their economic viability under an emissions trading scheme. Employers among EITE industries are foreshadowing company closures without assistance and compensation from the Government to help

them in the transition to a low carbon economy (e.g. ABC 2008; *Herald Sun* 2008).

These policies focus the debate for unions and environmental groups.

There is evidence to suggest that Australian unions are beginning to re-engage in new alliances around the issue of climate change; likewise environmental groups are reaching out to unions. To illustrate, the ACTU has joined forces with the Australian Council of Social Services, the Climate Institute, and the Australian Conservation Foundation to form the Southern Cross Climate Change Coalition (ACTU and ACF 2008). This Coalition is seeking to advance sustainable development policy initiatives, particularly as they relate to the 'green' economy. At a State level, both Unions New South Wales and the Victorian Trades Hall Council have established fora for discussions and debates with environmental groups, on the question of climate change. Similar contacts are evident in other States and involving other union confederations, such as the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council located in Victoria's brown-coal region.

Independently and quite separate from their activities with environmental organisations, unions have taken a series of initiatives aimed at advancing the 'green economy'. One measure that has been promoted by trade unions is to work with Skills Councils at the national and State levels to introduce 'green' skills training within the country's training system. Second, unions have taken some limited steps towards the promotion of examples of green training and green jobs, and the creation of model production units.

A number of unions have developed an account that addresses the idea of transition in a 'just' way to a sustainable and green economy. This aspect is captured in the sentiments expressed by the CFMEU. As stated:

Global warming responses that do not have a strong social justice component will tend to exacerbate disadvantage, as costs will be imposed that the disadvantaged have less capacity to meet. (CFMEU 2008: 9)

This idea of 'social justice' indicates a concern for workers and their communities in whatever is implied in the creation of the green economy. The union goes on to note the skills retraining and training implications of these moves, as workers take on new and different jobs in the green economy.

This theme has also been taken up by the AMWU. In a more extensive elaboration of the notion, the union proposes:

Responding to climate change will create many new jobs in renewable energy, energy efficiency and new transport technologies. Green jobs include a range of jobs, from production, operation and maintenance through to research, design and development. Many of these can utilise skills that are already in abundance in regions heavily reliant on carbon-intensive industries, creating new jobs for local people. (AMWU 2008: 11)

The emphasis here is on utilising skills from the 'dirty' economy as well as creating new skills and new jobs.

One of the notable initiatives is in sectors associated with the plumbing and related trades. In July 2008, the Plumbing Division within the (CEPU), in conjunction with a range of other industry bodies, as well as the Victorian State government, announced the opening of a 'Green Plumbing Centre'. This \$A9.1 million centre will 'train plumbers in sustainable, energy saving, waste reducing and water saving plumbing techniques' (Victorian Government 2008). The union in alliance with a range of industry organisations, such as the Plumbing Industry Commission and the Master Plumbers and Mechanical Services Association of Australia, sees training and education in 'green' skills as a way forward to establish the core features of a green economy (Plumbing Trades Employees Union 2008).

These initiatives involving the CEPU build on earlier work by the electrical trades division. Together with the Victorian State government, the union has worked with a variety of companies, and particularly Siemens, in an attempt to promote the manufacture of wind generators in the Latrobe Valley, the site 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 the late 1990s and early 2000s, the proposal eventually came to nothing when Siemens pulled out because of a lack of State government support (Burgmann et al. 2002).

Discussion

Three related themes emerge from the consideration of unions and environmental groups in relation to climate change.

1. Trade unions and environmental groups draw on overlapping constituencies, but with different sets of interests. The outcome is that trade unions often find it difficult to come to accommodations with environmental groups.
2. As oft noted, the organizational basis is distinctive, in ways that shape approaches and outcomes.
3. Trade unions and environmental groups have competing objectives, which can be distinguished as localized and universal thus framing the question of climate change in different ways

Trade unions as the 'voice of workers' are caught in a tension between the pressure to act as a 'vested interest' and/or a 'sword of justice' (Flanders 1970). Some argue that unions have a preoccupation with immediate terms and conditions of employment and

that it is thus difficult to extend policy beyond such concerns (Pocock 1998). Others have argued that unions as collective organisations have the capacity to extend their concerns to embrace a wider range of policy concerns than has been the case for much of the latter half of the twentieth century (Kelly 1998). In contrast environmental groups are also caught on such a tension, explaining the overlap in constituency and the distinctiveness of approach. In this case the tension between ‘vested interest’ and ‘sword of justice’ is not defined by work and employment relations but by organisational constraints shaped by constituents, policies and political positions.

For unions, the question becomes one of the conditions for union mobilisation (Kelly 1998; Voss and Sherman 2003). The way that the focus of union concerns, especially in relation to notions of ‘crisis’, is contested in the contemporary global context has implications for the tension between the immediacy of job security and the more opaque implications of climate change. In the longer term, job security and development is likely to be linked to the way in which climate change is addressed by governments and employers.

These developments have their counterparts elsewhere. In the US, for example, coalitions of labour, community, and environmental groups have a long history (e.g., Estabrook 2007). Since the 1980s, these coalitions have developed in response to environmental and occupational health problems at work and in communities. In a more general and policy relevant way, unions and environmental groups have forged alliances, for example the Apollo Alliance on Climate Change (2009) and the Blue-Green Alliance (2007), involving the Sierra Club, the United Steelworkers, Communication Workers of America and the National Resources Defense Council (Gera 2008).

In the UK union involvement on climate change has evolved out of past engagements about nuclear energy and weaponry, health and safety at work, and recently in relation to emerging policy development on renewable energy proposals, energy use, and the climate change debate (including the Stern Review 2007). In the 1980s and 1990s, unions (and particularly the mining and energy unions) focused formally on policies relating to nuclear energy and energy generation, often from a job defensive perspective. However, informally there were a number of joint actions between trade unionists and environmental groups around these issues as well as on chemical hazards and microwave radiation. In contrast to the US, the formal involvement of trade unionists has been more on the basis of individual ethical concerns, rather than collective engagement and alliance building.

In Germany the prominence of the conflict about the civil use of atomic energy as well as the pattern of Social Democratic politics and Green Party politics set the scene for a more comprehensive engagement by trade unions with environmental issues. Mainly embracing the ecological modernisation paradigm, some trade unions were important for shifting the Social Democrats' stance against atomic energy. The chemical industry trade unions also took a proactive and cooperative discursive stance on sustainable development, while service sector unions formulated policies on green themes like energy generation and waste management.

Thus, unions in the advanced capitalist economies address not only environmental subjects, they also reach out to a range of environmental groups. Nonetheless, trade unions and environmental groups have competing objectives, which can be distinguished as localized and universal thus framing the question of climate change in different ways. Unions are likely to be strengthened when they reach out to environmental groups, although as the Australian evidence indicates they are also an

effective voice on environmental matters in their own right. Unlike environmental groups they are able to tackle the human causes of climate change on the industrial front and through labour politics. In this way, the development of union capacity over environmental subjects provides the opportunity for revival and renewal.

Conclusion

Trade unions are rarely recognised for their roles and activities outside of industrial matters. When union activities surrounding non-industrial matters serve as a focal point they are often analysed or discussed in relation to productive relations and the vested interests of trade union organisations. These sorts of analysis can contribute to a degree of suspicion about the ‘true’ motivations of union engagement in non-industrial activities and a questioning of the real capacities of unions to act beyond industrial and workplace matters. As demonstrated in this paper unions in Australia have begun to open up a range of concerns and activities in relation to the environment and climate change. Unions are seeking to develop their capacities as an environmental actor through a range of activities focusing on internal solidarity (e.g. educating members about climate change and sustainability), external solidarity (e.g. campaigns in support of national and international framework agreements for reducing carbon emissions), and proactive initiatives such as those aimed at ‘transitioning’ local industries and economies towards a sustainable future.

Coalitions with other environmental organisations are important to union capacity building around environmental matters, particularly with regards to strengthening environmental legislation campaigns, but they constitute only one part of what unions are doing as environmental actors. This paper highlights the need to reframe the debate, to highlight the role trade unions can and are playing as environmental actors

in their own right, rather than focussing primarily on their activities in relation to union-environmental coalitions. Union purpose and capacities will continue to be tested as they grapple with this emerging area of policy and practice. Central to these developments will be emerging accommodations with environmental groups as climate change is played out. The mantra about ‘blue-green’ coalitions serving as the path to union renewal and revival, however, may distract from understanding the capacities that unions continue to draw upon (both in relation to and outside of the immediate productive relations) in the fight for social and environmental justice.

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