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# **Common ground: Rank-and-File Environmentalism - Democratic unions can fight for both jobs and the planet**

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**Labor is often considered hopelessly reactionary on the environment. But democratic unions can fight for both jobs and the planet.**

The “jobs versus environment” debate is often seen as a fundamental division between labor and environmentalists, most recently emerging in the fight over the Keystone XL pipeline. Despite dire warnings from scientists about its potentially disastrous environmental impact, the pipeline was endorsed by the AFL-CIO, which justified its decision by citing “job creation.” [1] Estimates range from 5,000-9,000 temporary positions — a drop in the bucket compared to the more than 794,000 unemployed construction workers [2] in the US — and a mere 35 permanent jobs [3].

Is there any kind of environmental degradation, environmental activists might wonder, unions won't endorse to secure a small handful of construction jobs?

Jeremy Brecher is right to point in a recent piece [4] to the need for the labor and environmental movements to “evolve toward a common program and a common vision.” To do so, we'll need to break down the false “jobs versus environment” dichotomy created by capital to obscure the fact that the exploitation of workers and the degradation of the environment go hand in hand.

Noting the common source of workers' exploitation and ecological degradation is important because it also points us to a solution. Workers are the ones who can halt the assault on the planet.

Energy workers — workers who drill, mine, and frack (and, in much smaller numbers, build and install solar, wind, and geothermal technologies) — occupy a special place at the nexus of capitalism's ecological destruction and human exploitation, a place that is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable.

Powerful, because energy sets the entire economic system in motion, and any action taken by the workers responsible for producing this energy quickly fans out to every sector of the economy. And vulnerable because the radical realignment of energy production they have the power to affect can threaten their livelihoods.

It's one thing to point out that workers, particularly energy workers, have the power to bring our planet back from the tipping point; it's another to get from where we are today, with a labor leadership that appears to be willing to risk the future of our species for slightly relieved unemployment, to where we need to be, with a fighting labor movement willing and able to demand and win our right to live on the planet.

But we actually have a not-too-distant historical example that can give us some concrete lessons:

Appalachian coal miners in the 1960s and 1970s who connected the struggle for union democracy and workplace safety to the struggle against “environmental mayhem” through the Miners for Democracy (MFD) caucus, which won control of the international leadership in a 1972 landslide victory.

The MFD is not remembered for its strong stand on environmental issues. The iconic popular culture portrayal of the MFD (and the infamous union boss they succeeded in ousting, Tony Boyle) is in Barbara Kopple’s documentary *Harlan County, USA* [5].

In the film, the MFD appears as a “kick the bums out” campaign against Tony Boyle, who, following nearly a decade of trampling over union democracy and ignoring a growing revolt in the coalfields over safety, had murdered the previous opposition candidate, Jock Yablonski, following the 1969 election stolen by the Boyle administration.

Yet the effort to oust Boyle transcended concerns about corruption. Beginning with Jock Yablonski’s campaign in 1969, and emerging even more strongly in the MFD campaign in 1972, the rank and file miners argued that the UMWA “must become the most progressive force in the region,” advocating not only for workers, but the broader communities in which they lived and the planet as a whole.

Yablonski’s campaign came at a moment of rebellion in the coalfields over safety issues. In 1969, over 60,000 miners — more than one-third of the mining workforce — participated in wildcat strikes, demanding safer working conditions and protections from black lung, a deadly (and completely preventable) respiratory disease that comes from inhaling coal dust. That year, 70,000 miners marched on the West Virginia capital to demand black lung legislation.

Yablonski saw the opportunity to connect the struggles for safety and miners’ health with the ecological destruction being faced by coal mining communities outside the workplace as strip mining ravaged the countryside, coal dust blackened the walls of family homes, and poisoned the food and water they ate and drank. Instead of confining the miners’ rebellion to workplace issues, he issued what Rep. Ken Hechler of West Virginia called “a veritable magna carta for the coal miners of America.”

“Every union should have a vision of the future,” stated Jock Yablonski as he announced his candidacy for the union presidency. “What good is a union that reduces coal dust in the mines only to have miners and their families breathe pollutants in the air, drink pollutants in the water, and eat contaminated commodities?”

Although a mere seven months elapsed between Yablonski’s declaration of candidacy and his and his family’s brutal murder in their home at the hands of Boyle’s thugs in Clarksville, Pennsylvania, his campaign laid the basis for the next round of struggle: the Miners for Democracy. The MFD expanded on Yablonski’s campaign, declaring that if coal could not be mined safely and cleanly, it would not be mined at all.

Mike Trbovich, the MFD’s vice-presidential candidate insisted the threat could be enforced: “Beyond the strictly bread-and-butter union issues, we plan to stress this responsibility of the union to the region where our members have to live. Our power rivals that of the coal companies, and we intend to use it.”

Jobs, the MFD insisted, were not at odds with the environment. The caucus suggested that any miners displaced by a national ban on strip mining or enforcement of anti-pollution laws be given other (union) jobs working to reclaim land that had been destroyed by coal companies or building up the infrastructure in their home states which had often been bypassed by state and federal

development projects.

The MFD shifted the terms of the debate. Instead of a choice between jobs and environment, they argued for different priorities: people and land before profit.

In fact, the MFD said that investing in the environment was the best way to protect jobs. After all, pursuit of profit in the coal industry had put half the nation's miners out of work and exacerbated the crushing poverty of central Appalachia. Miners understood that when the coal companies and their collaborators talked about protecting jobs in their defense of environmentally destructive mining, it was an outright lie. Enforcing the tougher land reclamation laws the MFD demanded — which would force companies to repair the damage to strip mining sites — would create thousands of new union jobs.

The MFD was also opposed to the creation of new jobs that would pollute the environment and endanger residents. As the MFD prepared to campaign against Boyle, the government was funneling most of its research money into the process of high BTU gasification — turning coal into gasoline.

Rank-and-file miners did their own research and concluded:

*“High BTU gasification is very dirty. It uses immense quantities of water. The only reason those plants can be built in the West is because the citizens their [sic] can't protect themselves from these hazards. . . Arnold [Miller, the MFD presidential candidate] must fight high BTU gasification because it pollutes even though it creates jobs.”*

The MFD also challenged the state over the issue of strip mining in the run-up to the 1972 election. Presidential candidate Arnold Miller declared: “Tough reclamation laws are essential and we must insist they are enforced. If the state won't do it, the union will.” Many miners went even further, calling for a nationwide ban on strip mining.

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**The** environmentalist vision advanced by miners in this period was as short lived as the vibrant union democracy movement that won control of the international leadership in 1972. Soon after winning the election, the MFD disintegrated as an organization. Rank and file activity continued, but without the national network and common vision that had characterized the period from 1969–72.

Although miners continued to fight nuclear power, sending organized miners contingents to antinuclear marches as late as 1981, the broad environmentalist vision had dissipated by the late 1970s. Alongside the decline of environmentalism came increasing dissatisfaction with Miller and his administration over contract negotiations. But this wasn't because the MFD was wrong about the potential to link the fight for good jobs to the fight for a healthy and sustainable future. So why did the Miners for Democracy fail?

The union coal miners of the 1960s grew radicalized alongside all the revolts and movements the decade brings to mind: the Vietnam War, civil rights and Black Power, women's liberation, gay and lesbian liberation (a small paper in Southern Illinois published in 1969 a call for coal miners to “come out wherever you are!”). But they were also keenly aware of an enormous structural transformation taking place in energy production.

Over the same ten year period that revolt brewed in the UMW, the energy industry itself was reorganizing. By the early 1970s, what we know today as the energy conglomerate had emerged, and it fundamentally transformed the relationship of coal miners to their employers.

As the oil companies bought up the coal companies that had previously been owned independently or by steel companies, miners' strikes became less effective. Outlasting Shell Oil was much harder than a local coal company, or even larger corporations like Bethlehem Steel, not only because the company was bigger and likely to have a larger stockpile of cash and resources, but also because the energy companies invested in multiple source fuels — coal, oil, natural gas, uranium — and then pitted workers responsible for extracting each fuel against each other.

Consolidation moved the odds strongly in capital's favor. That miners continued to wage successful strikes all the way up until the Pittston strike of 1989-90 (in which, ironically, current AFL-CIO Richard Trumka first gained national attention) is a strong testament to the power of solidarity and the long tradition of rank and file militancy in the UMW. But without a union capable of taking on the whole energy industry, success became much more difficult.

Coal miners were aware of the changes that were happening around them, but were powerful enough to potentially shape the outcome of energy industry reorganization. A core of militant miners recognized this. In *Miner's Voice*, a rank-and-file paper published by a member of Miners for Democracy, an editorial appeared in 1970 titled "Energy Workers Must Organize!"

*"When it becomes clear, as it is in the companies' eyes, that you mine energy, not coal, just as the oil workers drill energy, and that you all then work for the same people who own and control these companies, it's time to ask what the union leadership is doing to bring energy workers together to have sufficient bargaining power to obtain better contracts from the companies . . . and run our own affairs."*

The miner authors argued that the companies pretended the different fuel sources were competitive in order to play the oil workers' union off the miners' union, and the natural gas workers' unions off of both of them. Rather than organizing the energy workers together, the union leadership was collaborating with the companies — and throwing workers under the bus in the process.

Ultimately, the group of miners arguing for an energy workers union federation — or even a new union to represent all energy workers — were unsuccessful in transforming their union in that vision. This failure helped lead to the decline of the MFD, and along with it, the radical environmentalist vision they put forward.

The political space that had been opened up by the incredible levels of self-organization among rank and file miners allowed broad debate and agitation on issues like the environment. But as it became harder for workers to go on the offensive and the energy conglomerates continued to consolidate their power, miners found themselves fighting an increasingly uphill battle that left less and less room to fight for anything except survival.

Although they were some of the last workers to do so, the United Mine Workers did eventually face decline accompanied by the growth of conservatism. Today, rather than being seen as the vanguard of a movement to protect the land, miners are portrayed by many environmentalists as backwards, reactionary, and part of the problem.

Despite much discussion of the failures of the mainstream environmental movement, there has been little discussion of what role workers in the energy industries might play in helping build a sustainable future. Perhaps the rightward swing in the energy unions — or their breaking by the companies — has made defeat seem inevitable and radicalism seem impossible.

Yet echoes of the MFD strategy have begun to re-emerge. Canada's UNIFOR, which represents workers in several sectors of the energy industry, called for a nationwide moratorium on fracking,

and argued that unions need a vision that considers the health of the communities in which its members work and live.

Many who include workers as part of the problem forget that workers tend to be among those who suffer the most from the destruction their work inflicts. The concentration of energy production in places where few other job opportunities exist means that workers often take jobs that inflict ecological destruction they oppose. Women who occupied a strip mine in 1972 to stop the destruction of their mountains reported that “miners sympathized with the demonstration. These men said they would not be strip mining if there were other jobs available.”

To a significant sector of the environmentalist movement, it has become increasingly clear that the fate of environmental struggles are also bound up with the struggles for human liberation, and working class struggle in particular. Such a link seems to be supported by the story of the MFD.

That the emergence of ecological consciousness among coal miners was intimately linked to a union democracy movement isn't a coincidence. Fighting for democratic, rank and file-run unions is necessary for both opening the space for energy workers to discuss how to confront ecological destruction and to build the kind of power that will be necessary to confront the energy giants.

Production is what's at stake in this fight, in which people and the planet hang in the balance. We need to see the workers in these industries not as part of the problem, but as part of the solution.

**Trish Kahle**

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**P.S.**

\* “Rank-and-File Environmentalism”. Jacobin. 6.11.14:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/rank-and-file-environmentalism/>

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**Footnotes**

[1] [http://inthesetimes.com/article/16221/angering\\_environmentalists\\_afl\\_cio\\_pushes\\_fossil\\_fuel\\_investment](http://inthesetimes.com/article/16221/angering_environmentalists_afl_cio_pushes_fossil_fuel_investment)

[2] <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t14.htm>

[3] <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/>

[4] Available on ESSF (article 37495), [Common ground - 'Jobs vs. the Environment': How to Counter This Divisive Big Lie.](#)

[5] <https://www.criterion.com/films/777-harlan-county-usa>