

*** Third, environmental issues are linked to all the other issues confronting us.**

Economic forces are the key to almost every union issue. Environmental issues are no different.

Companies usually try to "externalize" their costs -- to make someone else pay part of the real cost of production, for example when workers are asked to pick up part of the cost of their health insurance.

Sometimes those costs are hidden. Bad working conditions lead to an increase in occupational accidents and illness. Some of that cost is paid by the workers' compensation system; most of it, however, is absorbed by the victims themselves in disability and lost income, and by all the rest of us, in higher overall medical and insurance bills.

Often these externalized costs are much larger than the costs the company avoided by refusing to improve conditions in the first place. But the company's concern is its own bottom line, not the overall cost to society.

As Steelworkers, we understand this process well. Our efforts to win higher wages, improved pensions, adequate insurance and safe working conditions are efforts to stop the company from dumping its costs onto us.

Environmental economics work the same. Some companies try to maximize their profits by ignoring the cost to the environment. Pollution is pumped into the air and water, toxic chemicals are allowed to escape, greenhouse and ozone-depleting gases are generated because the cost to the environment never appears in the company's balance sheet.

But the cost is real. And while the cost of environmental damage may be external to the company, the Earth itself is a closed system. Considering the Earth as a whole, there is no such thing as an external cost.

A healthy economy is essential to a healthy environment. Protecting the environment ultimately means more efficient production, with less drain on the Earth's resources, and less waste. But it will cost money to research, design and implement new controls; it will cost money to substitute new products for old.

Economic justice is critical. In a full-employment economy, workers displaced because their companies failed to adapt will find new jobs. Union rights are important also, to ensure that the jobs provide decent wages and benefits.

In fact, the environment impacts almost every union issue. Our health care system, for example, is stressed by the burden of environmental disease. The problems of poor people and minorities are made worse by the fact that they are often forced to live in the most polluted areas.

On a global scale, it is useless to work for a clean environment without also working for economic justice and human rights. It is no accident that the countries of Eastern Europe, where free speech was suppressed for so long, where free trade unions were outlawed, where all the decisions were made by a small and privileged elite, are among the most polluted on Earth. It is no accident that the residents of

the Black townships of South Africa suffer high rates of respiratory disease brought on by ferocious levels of air pollution.

Some companies may try to avoid strong environmental regulations by moving overseas. But the answer is not to repeal our own laws, any more than the answer to global competition is to cut our own wages to poverty levels. Instead, we should work with unions and governments in developing countries to improve conditions there.

A good first step would be to stop making the problems of developing countries worse than they already are. Some industrialized countries have tried to use poorer nations as a dumping ground for toxic waste. That practice should be prohibited by international law. In addition, we should forbid the export of products and processes prohibited in the exporting country because they damage health or the environment, and work to ensure that all other exports can be used safely.

Correspondingly, we should restrict the import of products made in ways that damage the environment. It does not help the world environment to export pollution -- and jobs -- to countries unwilling to meet fair standards.

Near Sao Paolo in Brazil is a 1.6 million ton steel plant owned by the Brazilian steel company COPISA. The smoke and dust from that plant help give the Cubatao area the nickname "Death Valley." There are reports that hundreds of workers and nearby residents suffer blood diseases due to uncontrolled benzene emissions. Thousands are afflicted by respiratory diseases. Brazil needs steel for trucks, bridges, housing and consumer goods. But the production of the COPISA plant is exported to North America to earn hard currency to pay off Brazil's enormous debt. We need to deal with the problem of Third World debt if we are to control pollution from that plant, or stop the destruction of the rain forests, or solve the other problems of our common global environment.

The World Commission on Environment and Development, set up in 1983 by the United Nations, has defined the goal as "sustainable development," finding a way to meet our present needs without destroying the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In the words of the commission: "Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes."