

TAKING ACTION

"Your role as a consumer of air can be crucial for the community because you may well be the bridge between the community and the plant, in the sense that you actually work in the plant. The community may well be influenced in the type of standards it recommends by your attitude about and desire for safe air. We refuse to be the buffer between positive pollution control activity by the community and resistance by the industry. While the security of our jobs is not the price which will be paid for aggressive abatement activity, the ruination of our health may well be the risk which will be taken for the lack of action."

I.W. Abel
USWA Air Pollution Conference
1969

Unions have always led the fight for economic justice and human rights. We have sought to increase the income of all workers, organized and unorganized. We have struggled for better working conditions and fair treatment on the job. We have worked to ensure better pensions for our parents, and a better education for our children.

Frequently, we have fought for safer working conditions -- in other words, for a cleaner environment inside our plants. Workers have a gut understanding of environmental issues -- 100,000 North Americans die each year from workplace diseases caused by the same chemicals that later find their way into our air and water. The environment outside the workplace is only an extension of the environment inside.

Today, the greatest threat to our children's world may be the destruction of their environment. Our own jobs are also threatened by corporations that pollute their neighborhoods and walk away. Protecting the environment is more than good citizenship, it is an essential program for unions and their members.

In some ways, the USWA has had an environmental program for more than 20 years. We held our first conference on air pollution in 1969, more than a year before the first "Earth Day." A conference in Denver examined pollution from smelters in the western United States in 1973. District 6 held air pollution conferences as early as 1966. A 1980 USWA Convention resolution warned of the dangers of global warming, years before it became a matter of widespread public concern. And in 1989, the Canadian Policy Conference adopted a strong policy paper on the environment.

But for the most part, the USWA has seen environmental protection as a legislative issue. We provided strong lobbying support for nearly every major environmental bill in the U.S. Congress, the Canadian Parliament, state legislatures, and provincial assemblies. In the United States, the USWA is an active member of the National Clean Air Coalition, and was instrumental in the passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act and earlier legislation. In Canada, the USWA participates in the Canadian Coalition on Acid Rain. In turn, environmental groups helped us achieve many of the right-to-know laws in the United States, and effective chemical testing regulations in Canada.

Some USWA locals are working hard on environmental issues. Local Union 6500, at the Inco nickel smelter in Sudbury, Ontario, has been fighting sulfur dioxide pollution since the local was chartered in 1961. The local helped force the Ontario government to begin measuring pollution levels in the town. In coalition with neighboring environmental and community groups, Inco steelworkers have won dramatic improvements in pollution control.

Environmental committees have been established by Local Union 1010, District 31, at Inland Steel in Indiana, and Local Union 480, District 3, at the Cominco Lead/Zinc smelter in Trail, British Columbia. The committees work with environmentalists from the community to protect both jobs and the environment. Other local unions have added environmental issues to the regular duties of their safety and health committees.

These locals point the way. The environment is not just a legislative issue. Protecting our children's future and our own jobs from the threat of environmental destruction is a job for all levels of the union.

Some say the task is too big for any one local, or union, or country. Certainly it is. But that has never stopped us from fighting for economic justice or human rights in the past. The biologist Rene Dubos coined a phrase that sums it up: "Think globally; act locally." We should not forget the global nature of the problem, but we must not be paralyzed. In this issue, as in any other, an active union can have an impact.

In fact, workers are in a key position in the fight for environmental quality. Violations of pollution regulations can be difficult for the public to spot. Nor is it possible for the government to monitor continuously every potential polluter. It is much harder to hide illegal behavior from plant workers. And through collective bargaining and the power of the union, organized workers have an especially effective tool for forcing a cleanup.

Some maintain that environmental problems can be solved through individual actions, like turning off lights, reusing plastic bags and car pooling to work. Individual efforts are valuable and they should be promoted. They can help cut pollution and decrease the waste of our resources. More important, they can help establish a personal commitment to protecting the environment.

But individual efforts are not enough. Car pooling will not force Detroit to build vehicles that do not pump carbon dioxide into the air; cutting our use of plastic bags will not lead to the development of safer manufacturing processes for plastics; turning off the lights will not get scrubbers built on coal fired utility plants. In fact, individual energy use accounts for only about 30% of total consumption.

As union members, we have learned the value of collective action. We do not tell oppressed workers to handle it themselves, individually. We attack the problem with the strength that comes from organization. We do promote individual efforts -- consumer boycotts are a good example. But we focus our efforts on organizing, collective bargaining and political action. Protecting our children's world and our own jobs will require a coordinated program, involving all levels of the union.

As always, the most important actions must take place at the local union level. First, local unions should establish a structure for dealing with environmental issues. In a large industrial local, an environmental committee could be formed. In a smaller local, the issue could be handled by the safety and health committee. Whatever the structure, the committee should have the support and interest of the local union officers and the staff representative.

The environment or safety and health committee should undertake the task of researching the company's environmental record. Are their sources of raw materials threatened? Where does their waste go? What are they dumping into the air and water? Are their products harmful? Are they in violation of any environmental laws or regulations? Much of this information is a matter of public

record. All of it should be legally disclosable to the union as information needed for collective bargaining. Any of it could be critical to devising a long-term program for protecting jobs.

Armed with information, the local union could, where necessary, work to negotiate a clean-up, or a switch to safer products, before the company is forced out of business. In 1982, for example, Local Union 6887, at the Noranda copper refinery in Montreal, helped the company negotiate a temporary variance from new water pollution regulations, in return for a commitment to install state-of-the-art controls assuring the plant's long-term compliance. In 1989 Local Union 1066, at the USX Gary Works, used its political power to force a waste handling company on the plant site to reduce its inventory of dangerous chlorine gas, and to begin working with USX on an emergency response plan.

Most USWA contracts give workers the right to refuse abnormally hazardous work. This provision should be extended to orders that threaten public health, or violate environmental regulations. "Whistleblower" language should be negotiated, protecting workers who report suspected environmental problems to the union or outside authorities.

Local unions can also join with environmental groups on common issues. We need them to support and understand the concerns of working people. They, in turn, can benefit from our organizational strength and knowledge of the workplace.

One such coalition was built in 1983 by the members of USWA Local Union 25 and environmentalists in Tacoma, Washington. Earlier that year, the Reagan-appointed officials of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had proposed a new regulation for arsenic that would apply only to the Asarco Tacoma copper smelter. The regulation was designed to close the plant; it had the potential for driving a wedge between unions and environmental groups. But that never occurred. Environmentalists opposed closing the plant; the union listed ways arsenic could be reduced using engineering controls.

Together, they distributed thousands of buttons with the single word "Both," in answer to the Reagan Administration's jobs vs. environment blackmail. The coalition was successful; EPA began work on a revised regulation specifying additional controls rather than a plant shutdown. However, the story has a sad ending. Two years later, Asarco itself closed the plant in the wake of declining copper prices. Asarco is now spending millions to clean up the site.

In Canada, the USWA also is working with environmentalists to preserve both jobs and the environment. For example, USWA Districts 3 and 6, along with a number of environmental groups, have opposed the development of new surface mines for high-grade uranium ore in northern Saskatchewan. The mines would seriously damage the fragile environment of that region, create severe radiation risks to miners, and throw thousands of workers in existing operations out of work.

Finally, local unions can educate their members and their families on local, national and global environmental problems. In addition, locals can help educate our environmental allies on the needs of working people for decent, continued employment.

In these efforts, local unions will have the support of the International Safety and Health Department, which will be renamed the "Health, Safety and Environment Department" in recognition of the importance of environmental issues. Support will also be available from the Canadian National Office. The union is producing educational materials on the environment, available for local union use. The department and the National Office will be available to work with local unions on environmental issues.