



# **Green Syndicalism**

**An Alternative Red/Green Vision**

**Jeff Shantz**



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*Manufactured in the United States of America*

*Dedicated to Myrna Shantz*

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# Preface

**By now** it is generally recognized that the burdens of ecological destruction are borne disproportionately by working class and poor people and their communities. These impacts include disease, illness, and personal health effects, as well as lost income because of sick days and the costs of family care. It is not only that the damaging effects of harms such as pollution, toxic contamination, habitat destruction, and waste dumping are felt most severely within working class and poor communities (including those of peasants and indigenous peoples). Even more, the destruction of nature tends to affect most negatively those who are most dependent on the land for sustenance—be they subsistence farmers or resource workers.

Despite being the ones overwhelmingly bearing the brunt of damage inflicted on the environment by industrial capitalist development (beyond nature itself, of course) working-class and poor people are the ones whose voices are the most marginalized, excluded, and silenced when it comes to discussions about how properly to address ecological concerns and protect nature from further harms. The concerns, fears, visions, and aspirations of the working classes and poor, and their strategies for positive change, are largely unheard—particularly within mainstream debates over ecology and environmentalism. Theirs are certainly not the perspectives that are shaping public discussions about ecological protection and the future directions or models of social development and human approaches to social and ecological care.

That working-class and poor people's perspectives on ecology and their activities to protect nature are ignored by major political

parties and ruling governments in countries of the global North, particularly the United States and Canada, is fairly obvious at this point in time. Even more than this, though, it is also true that the perspectives and activities of the working classes and poor are largely absent from most of what passes for environmentalism or formal environmental movements, both radical and mainstream. Most recognized environmental groups have been composed of middle-strata or more privileged, often professional, sectors, rather than blue collar workers, the poor, or the unemployed. Much has been written about the “middle-class” character of mainstream environmentalism and its representation in groups such as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, and the Suzuki Foundation. This middle-class character of formal environmental groups is reflected in the appeal to professional channels for environmental redress, particularly the formal venues of parliamentary democracy and political reform through legislation and policy change within established channels of political practice such as lobbying and media campaigns.

While some might expect mainstream environmental groups to have some difficulty engaging working-class concerns, it is perhaps more troubling that radical environmentalists, those with deep-green perspectives, have had as hard a time, or harder, engaging with working-class and poor people around environmental issues. Indeed, radical ecology movements have often taken an explicitly hostile approach to working-class, particularly blue-collar, workers. One might call to mind Sea Shepherd Society captain Paul Watson’s vitriolic condemnation of resource workers as parasites or a rot whose demise would cause him not a single tear.

As a radical environmentalist and member of Earth First! and Greenpeace (back when it still preferred direct action to fund-raising), I was regularly shocked by the anti-working-class perspectives of movement comrades and the ease with which caricatures of working-class people were thrown around. Many saw working-class folks as the happy destroyers of the planet who loved their cars and big-box stores more than their planet. Often they were portrayed as mindless consumers who loved to work and shop and could not be freed from what

was believed to be their “blissful ignorance.” They certainly could not be expected to obtain the enlightened consciousness of the eco-activists (or eco-warriors). There was a tendency to dismiss without hearing what people’s actual concerns, fears, and hopes were.

For many, talking with workers generally was considered a waste of time. For others, some workers, particularly industrial and resource workers, were actually the enemy. Indeed, blue-collar workers were presented as largely responsible for the destruction of the planet. They were held to be as culpable as the corporate bosses who dominated socioeconomic decision making. This perspective framed strategic and tactical approaches to movement building and educational work. The proper strategy, for many ecological activists, was to gain support from more privileged sectors who might bring pressure to bear on politicians or companies. Greenpeace canvassers typically preferred professional, more privileged neighborhoods and complained when sent to working-class “turf.” Many simply felt uncomfortable talking with blue-collar workers.

As someone born into a working-class family and raised in a working-class community (even worse, an auto workers’ community) who would develop into a person with a radical approach to ecological issues, I was regularly struck by how out of touch the environmentalists’ constructed assumptions about working-class folks were from my own experiences growing up. The people I knew—family, friends, fellow workers of my parents—were generally people who were deeply concerned about nature. Many of them still felt very strong connections to the land, worked it directly, and/or spent as much time as possible in natural and wild spaces. At work they tried to make their workplaces less polluted, dirty, or wasteful. Many had some involvement with health and safety issues and worked with union representatives to try to address issues of industrial impacts on themselves, coworkers, and their communities. Some stood defiantly against their managers and union reps alike when health and safety issues were not being adequately addressed. For this they faced real punishment. Some were suspended or moved to harder jobs within the auto plant. Often they were harassed by management or the union.

Were any of them “radicals”? Perhaps one or two. Most, certainly not. But they were decidedly not the careless consumers of commodities that the deep greens made them out to be. Some might even have become radicalized had opportunities for such alternatives (and decent spaces for organizing) been available to them. At the very least they would have been open to and appreciated the conversation. Indeed, many were open to the ideas that I would later bring from radical ecological circles (even if they remained skeptical of some of the prospects for success).

Unfortunately that conversation was one that most of the deep-green activists that I knew and worked with did not want to have (or were uncomfortable with attempting). When I suggested that we environmental activists start attending labor council meetings in Vancouver, the response ranged from nervous laughter to outright derision. “Why would we waste our time with that?” “What could possibly be gained?” “Did I have a death wish?” “Was I trying to get people hurt?”

Yet labor council would have provided a fairly easy starting point for talking about issues with other activists, this time labor activists. It would also have allowed greens to become familiar to the labor council folks (and labor organizers to the environmentalists). Simply showing up and engaging in conversations would have provided some basis for trust and understanding.

Years later I saw, firsthand, the rewarding results of such interactions in the great efforts of the Windsor and District Labour Council, Environment Committee, and the Citizens Environment Alliance, a grassroots organization that brought together rank-and-file workers and environmentalists, also in Windsor (my hometown). These venues provided organizing spaces for ecological and labor activists to meet, discuss, strategize, and develop campaigns and other shared projects. Eventually, participants developed radical (participatory, democratic, deep-green, even anarchist) approaches out of their common work and through open confrontation with the limits of “their own” movements and movement organizations. This is an interesting process that I examine in detail in *Green Syndicalism*.

Unfortunately the greens often did not see or appreciate the irony of their own positions. During one Greenpeace campaign briefing session, the lead campaigner decided to open the meeting on an inspiring note with a list of ten things that could be done to help the environment right now. Somewhere around number three or four on the list was the call to “form a union in your workplace.” The reasons were straightforward and compelling. If you want or expect people to work to defend nature on a day-to-day basis it will be difficult if they have greater and more regular opportunities to participate in decision making and implement decisions in the sphere of life in which they spend much (or most) of their day—at work. Even more, people are more likely to spend time defending nature where they feel they have greater security or support materially.

Urged on by this suggestion, a couple of us decided to take up the call presented, entirely unintentionally, by the campaigner, and we began talking to people in the office about organizing the canvassers within a union. Unfortunately the response was almost entirely negative. “Why do we need that?” “Aren’t unions obsolete?” “The environment is too important to be distracted by such issues.” “Aren’t unions to blame for the industrial machine and ecological damage in the first place?” Worst of all, once the campaigner got wind of the union talk (which she herself had raised as a green action), threats were leveled against those of us identified as instigators or troublemakers.

These sentiments are not at all confined to the past of environmental politics. They find too common expression in modern movements, despite the evolution of ecological movements. I was reminded of this again while finishing the editing on this very book. In April of 2011, I helped to organize a blockade and occupation of a highway being built along the banks of the Fraser River in Metro Vancouver. Planned and designed solely to increase the flow of global trade into and out of British Columbia, the highway is part of a larger project, including oil pipelines across the northern and southern regions of the province. The highway itself will lead to increased pollution, contamination of land, destruction of wild areas, damaging of salmon streams, and loss of farmland, along with other harms. Even more, the highway

represents a massive transfer of wealth upward as public funds are taken from social programs that benefit working-class and poor communities, such as health care, education, and housing, and directed toward a subsidy for multinational corporations and the oil industry. Unfortunately, some of the people who took part in the action showed little understanding of working people's concerns or the realities of living in a suburban area. Signs appeared suggesting that regular folks loved their cars more than the planet, even hated the planet, without any sense that people both were concerned about the environment and needed to drive to work in an area ill served by public transit. Many felt uncomfortable even canvassing the community to talk with neighbors about the issues. At the same time, some working-class folks expressed concerns about direct action and the decision to engage in an occupation of the road site. Clearly tensions remain.

This small example is not unique, and larger conflicts have appeared recently in the context of alternative globalization politics. The gap between mainstream unions and the direct action politics of ecological and social movements persists and provides still a major obstacle to broadened resistance to the social and ecological destruction caused by state capitalist development. And the antagonism is not all the responsibility of ecological activists. Much can be laid at the doorstep of the mainstream labor movement.

In events like the G20 protests in Toronto during the summer of 2010 and the state clampdown against protesters that occurred there emerge real opportunities for recognition and understanding that are not always so readily available behind the screen of "business as usual." The learning curve shifts and some things become much clearer. One of the interesting revelations of the G20 fallout is the extent to which many in the union leadership are governed by the morals, values, and prejudices of the dominant classes. This echoing of dominant perspectives has been expressed in the numerous calls for repression of the anarchist black bloc by would-be spokespeople of the labor movement in Canada. A rather stunning case in point has been the number of open statements of support for, indeed appeals for, the state capitalist rule of law. For some, the "rule of law" should have held against the

black bloc. Others turn to the rule of law as a statist security blanket providing the basis for—the very conditions of—their “peaceful protests,” which the black bloc supposedly infringed upon.

In expressing fidelity to the rule of law, what is really being affirmed is fidelity to the state and to the bosses. Any union that expresses fidelity to the rule of law must be responsive to questions. To do so is to negate the rich history of the working class and labor movements. For much of its history, right up to the present, the union movement has been “against the law,” its actions criminalized, its organizers arrested, and worse. Anyone who’s been on a picket line when it really mattered should know how to take the “rule of law.”

It was within and from such a conflictual milieu that the work of Judi Bari and Industrial Workers of the World/Earth First! Local 1 sounded a clarion—a loud and lively wake-up call. Local 1 reminded us, workers and ecologists, that there had been alternative labor histories—expressions not of compromise and capitulation but of militance, action, and radical anticapitalism. Their work reminded us that the practices of sabotage, blockades, and direct action that greens thought they invented or had a monopoly on had already been used—and used effectively—generations before by industrial and resource workers against the bosses who were destroying their lives at the same time as they were destroying the planet. It was a revelation for many. Local 1 saw the very resource workers whom ecologists viewed as a threat as potential allies—as neighbors whose concerns about job loss were inextricable from concerns about the devastation of the environment in which they worked.

It is also necessary to recognize finally that properly addressing and overcoming ecological problems in a sustained and meaningful way will require the active involvement, and direction, of working-class and poor people—those humans who have the most to lose and the most to gain from the struggles over eco-social transformation. Radical environmentalists will also need to recognize that working-class and poor people are already making important contributions to ecological defense, even if their efforts take forms that are unfamiliar to ecological movement activists.

Some of my most memorable conversations on doorsteps were with working people who told me stories of their own clandestine activities in defense of the earth (their workplace or neighborhood). Whether blocking drains so toxic wastes could not be flushed out of factories or simply sabotaging equipment so that it could not produce waste matter, it was clear that working people, often on their own and without the support of a union, and often in opposition to their own economic interests, were taking drastic actions—in the face of possible job loss or legal penalty—to halt the abuse of the planet. Often the actions they took were more compelling, and placed them in greater immediate material danger, than the actions so trumpeted and mythologized by radical environmentalists who have simultaneously derided the passivity or ignorance of working people.

The critical challenges facing movements for positive social change involve the relationship between unions and community-based social movements. The form of alliances, coalitions, and organizations involving unions and community-based groups (antipoverty activists, no borders activists, and anarchists) will determine the scope of opposition to states and capital and the real potential of evolving opposition to neoliberal politics. Perhaps the key point on which this challenge pivots is the question of direct action and civil disobedience, the relationship of social movements to violations of law and property destruction. These are questions of strategy and tactics to be sure, but even more they are questions of how we understand the character of the state within capitalist societies like Canada. These questions have been ongoing, intensifying in the period of neoliberal globalization and the emergence of alternative globalization movements and demonstrations against institutions of global state-capital, such as the G8/G20.

These are issues that can be difficult to address honestly, tending to illicit strong emotional responses from participants on both labor and social movement sides. Criticism is often harshly received, and the critics can be too readily dismissed as “outsiders.” If alliances, coalitions, and organizations are to develop and thrive on a more durable basis it is important not to paper over differences and divergences and instead to have honest, open, and critical analysis of challenges and

obstacles to building movements that might be capable not of criticizing or complaining about neoliberal regimes, but of stopping them. Given my background and experiences as an environmental activist who has also been a union organizer, I am perhaps particularly well suited to address these issues.

The continued efforts of green syndicalism suggest a way out of the impasse. Green syndicalism suggests new (old) forms of organization for both green and labor politics—based not on hierarchical and formal structures (such as mainstream unions with their executives, board meetings, Robert’s Rules, and contracts) but on the informal, egalitarian, affinity-based practices of which greens are so fond.

Green syndicalism can be found in a range of activities that take place every day in workplaces all around us. It is expressed in actions of informal work groups and neighborhood organizing. It is expressed in rank-and-file opposition to bosses and critics of union conservatism and passivity. It is found in health and safety committees and in efforts to stop dumping in poor and working-class neighborhoods, or in community efforts to clean up brownfields (and make the corporations responsible pay). It is expressed in the amazing efforts of environmental activists to organize their own workplaces (still a top-five thing that can be done for a green future after all). Green syndicalism has taken real form in groups, organizations, and alliances like the Citizens Environment Alliance, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Green Work Alliance, and various rank-and-file flying squads.

My own ecological perspective is deeply rooted in my childhood and youth experiences growing up in a working-class family and community. It is there that my first environmental concerns were expressed, nurtured, and supported—because I come from a blue-collar home, not in spite of it. In *Green Syndicalism* I draw upon these experiences as well as my organizing experiences within radical ecology, antipoverty, and labor movements to explore perspectives that express the commonality and mutuality between movements and broader struggles against the state capitalist structures and relations that destroy nature at the same time as they exploit people and harm their communities.



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