

InsideCounsel

Strange Bedfellows

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Labor unions and environmental organizations are unlikely allies in the quest for a greener America. Historically, the two viewed each other with skepticism, if not downright hostility. Unions feared the environmentalists' clean-up measures would close plants and eliminate jobs. Environmentalists berated unions for backing job-creating but Earth-destroying proposals, such as opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil drilling.

But in the past few years, the two sides have found common ground. In 2006, the 1.2-million-member United Steelworkers Union (USW) joined forces with the Sierra Club, the nation's largest grassroots environmental organization, to form the Blue-Green Alliance.

A broader coalition called the Apollo Alliance was launched in 2004 and now counts among its endorsers a long list of unions and environmental organizations.

Apollo also is endorsed by dozens of businesses engaged in alternative energy and other “green” projects.

While they have differences in specific objectives and approaches, both alliances focus their efforts on promoting alternative energy with the goal of creating new jobs and a stronger economy while improving the environment.

“The impetus in recent years for greater cooperation between unions and environmental groups is the recognition by many workers that environmental protection and environment-related industry offer great potential for job creation and economic growth,” says Brian Obach, author of “Labor and the Environmental Movement: The Quest for Common Ground.”

“That has made unions like the steelworkers realize that environmentalists are actually their allies in promoting the new green economy,” he says.

Policy Priorities

That realization hit home in 2006 for David Foster, then a USW district director, as he was rewriting the union’s 1990 environmental policy statement.

“I came to believe that solving environmental issues was not just a way to avert an ecological disaster but also an opportunity to create the greatest economic development program of this century,” Foster says. “I started looking

at the clean energy economy not as something to worry about, but as a tool to rebuild manufacturing.”

Foster now heads the Blue-Green Alliance, uniting blue-collar USW members with the “greens” of the Sierra Club in public education and lobbying initiatives. Its prime legislative objective is federal and state renewable energy standards that assign a price to carbon emissions and use the revenue to reinvest in clean energy projects and technologies.

The Alliance also advocates major changes in trade policy to discourage the flight of industrial jobs to countries like China, where products including steel can be manufactured more cheaply in part because of lax environmental laws. Foster points out that illegal deforestation in Indonesia, which provides pulp to paper companies, contributes to global warming and also makes U.S. paper mills uncompetitive.

“There is a very direct connection between the problem of deforestation, which is greatly aggravating global warming, the illegal logging that is at its core, and the subsidy this provides a global company to then import products that put American workers out of work and destroy American companies that are trying to harvest timber in a sustainable fashion,” he says.

While the Blue-Green Alliance focuses on the positive message of developing green jobs in America, the organization doesn't rule out battles with corporations over pollution issues. Last year, for example, as part of

the Alliance's campaign against DuPont's use of the chemical PFOA, the USW and the Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club organized workers and nearby residents concerned about the PFOA found in the water around a DuPont plant.

But to Foster, the bigger issue is positioning the U.S. chemical industry to remain competitive in a green future. The auto industry, he says, suffered economic losses and had to shed jobs because it did not remain competitive on fuel efficiency. With Europe leading the way in raising environmental standards for the chemical industry, he thinks chemical companies also could be left behind.

“We should be leaders in the transition to green chemistry,” he says. “It is an issue of job security as well as an issue of community health.”

Galvanizing Issue

While the Blue-Green Alliance talks about trade policy and green chemistry as part of its effort to build the green economy, the Apollo Alliance is more squarely focused on energy policy. It shares with the Blue-Greens the objectives of reducing carbon emissions and creating new green jobs, but also stresses reducing dependency on foreign oil.

In fact, Apollo recently merged with Americans for Energy Independence, which had similar goals. Thirty-five labor groups are endorsers of the coalition,

including the AFL-CIO, UNITE HERE!, the United Mine Workers and the Teamsters. They are joined by 23 environmental organizations, including Greenpeace, the National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Law and Policy Center, and the Natural Resources Defense Council, as well as trade associations and businesses engaged in renewable energy.

“The Apollo Alliance is in the right place at the right time to bring together people from all walks of life around a reasonable response to the issue,” says Jerome Ringo, president of Apollo.

Apollo’s “reasonable response” includes lobbying state legislatures to pass renewable energy standards requiring a certain percentage of energy to come from alternative energy sources. Twenty-seven states have passed such standards. At the federal level, the alliance is seeking funding for renewable energy research. It also supports green building projects.

“I believe the environment is the galvanizing issue of our times,” says Ringo, a former petro-chemical plant union member. “It’s an opportunity to bring together those who once were on different sides around a common issue that is impacting all of our lives.”

Molding Details

With a change of administration coming in Washington, the labor-environmental alliances will be well positioned to help shape future policies addressing global warming,

says Eric Smith, a University of California-Santa Barbara political science professor. Regardless of who wins the election in November, there will be major initiatives to address global warming and build a green economy, he says.

“It’s going to happen. The question is what are the details going to be,” Smith says. “On the business-labor side, they realize the best move is to get together with environmental groups and try to guide policy changes that are better for them. So the alliances make a lot of sense.”

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