

Green Syndicalism – A Very Brief Introduction

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The exploitation of labor and the exploitation of land under capitalism have always been integrally connected – one does not occur without the other. From the violence of enclosures of commons, expanded across the globe through colonialism – ongoing acts that are the bedrock of capitalist property relations. Through the dispossession, displacement, and social control of the enclosed upon, in the service of capitalist property and labor markets. Violent expropriation of land, and the means of the sustenance of life, are the very conditions for forced production for profit. Labor is rendered exploitable by destruction of its conditions of autonomous survival.

The connected character of the exploitation of land and labor is shown forcefully in the fact that the industries most directly destructive of nature are also those which have been most dangerous and deadly for workers and for Indigenous people. Logging, mining, fishing, farming.

Ending the exploitation of one is not possible without ending the exploitation of the other. And yes, this includes landback for Indigenous peoples. Ownership of the earth in the pursuit of profit is the condition driving the destruction of nature and the destruction of planetary (including of course human) life. People are rendered as labor for sale and purchase when nature, their means of survival is.

A fundamental position of green syndicalism is that those working class, those exploited by capital in re/production and distribution and forced to survive through the labor market are crucially placed to end the dual exploitation of land and labor. This is so for a few key reasons.

The Potential Power of Workers

First and foremost, given their central position within the labor process, and place in workplaces, workers can directly stop harmful industrial practices. This is most obviously shown in the strike. By withdrawing and withholding their labor, workers make industrial processes stop. They literally cease to operate. At the same time, given their knowledge of re/production processes, workers can halt or alter production in ways that do not raise secondary harms to nature.

Workers hold a potential power which when wielded, can be more directly and immediately impactful than the external or secondary actions of outside actors. Environmentalists picketing a plant or construction site, for example, will have less impact than the workers employed there picketing would have. So even the same action can hold more power for one group compared to another strictly because of their structural position within re/productive processes.

Workers' own concerns with health and safety (exposure to workplace contaminants, etc.) intersect with ecological concerns in very personal ways. So too do their concerns for community and family in areas affected by industrial processes at their workplaces. This can, despite rigid stereotypes to the contrary, make workers strong ecological allies.

Tactics

The power of worker strategy and tactics – as workers – derives from their special place within processes of re/production and distribution. The most powerful tactic on the whole is the strike – the refusal to do land and labor destroying work. The strike is the most potent direct action – stopping harm from happening and making it difficult or impossible for capital to continue them. It is not a moral appeal, request, or even demand – it is consequential action that achieves the intended aim directly, without the mediation involved in third party actions.

This depends of course on the level of rank-and-file organizing and capacity to stop scabs from being deployed or to block conservative union leadership from crafting deals with management. No tactic is deployed in a pure form and organizing is always itself an action. But even then, using scabs incurs a cost on capital.

Another key tactic is **sabotage**. The place of workers in acts of sabotage can be crucial when we talk about green actions, because sabotage can have harmful consequences to natural environments, particularly where heavy industry is involved. Workers have a close familiarity and understanding of industrial processes they are involved in and how they can be sabotaged effectively in ways that are not destructive of nature. They also know the most significant break points to shut things down.

Workers, because of their placement and positionality also have access to industrial processes that environmentalists and others do not have and may not be able to gain. This access cannot be overlooked.

I have had numerous conversations with workers, going back to my days as an autoworker, who carry out sabotage within industrial plants to block harmful processes from happening (plugging drains, stopping effluent, disabling machinery with toxic exhausts, etc.). Sometimes it can be as innocuous in appearance as putting a part on the assembly line slightly improperly and ruining most of a shift of production (as I may or may not have done).

Blockades. Logistical workers have long histories of organizing blockades in support of community movements and against destructive ecological or social conditions. Perhaps the most prominent example recently has been the blockading by dockworkers of Israeli state shipping lines.

Boycotts. Workers can effectively initiate boycotts of harmful products, working with community members to take harmful processes or products out of operation. Insider boycotts against harmful materials or against materials that are sourced from ecologically or socially destructive origins or from dubious sources (apartheid companies, etc.) offer unique promise.

Ecological Reclamation and Reconstruction

Workers in specific industries will be crucial in reclamation and reconstruction activities in moving toward ecological futures. This is because of the unique knowledge they have of specific industries being ended or transformed or requiring clean up or restoration.

One example is the decommissioning of tar sands developments and the reclamation of ecologically devastated areas and wastelands that were created by tar sands development.

Organizing is always key. Because workers are uniquely placed to undertake and enact deep green social transformation does not mean they will, of course. Some workers are conditioned by capital to tie their supposed interests with the short term aims of the particular company or industry in which they work. And, under capitalism, when successfully selling your labor on the capitalist labor market is a prerequisite to survival, the threat of losing your job is a potent inhibition. And this can be, and is, manipulated toward anti-ecological ends. We have seen this in logging, tar sands, and pipelines. But we have also seen the opposite – workers allying with environmentalists and Indigenous activists to engage in eco-defense.

Organizing: A Start

So, some activities to get there. If you are in a union, you can make use of the opportunities and basic protections you have in order to create, expand, or redistribute organizing resources and spaces. There are some useful ways of doing so.

Flying squads. Flying squads are rapid response networks that can deploy quickly to take action, whether to assist with workplace pickets or to support community groups in actions like an eviction defense or squat or welfare office occupation supporting unemployed workers or Indigenous land defense. Flying squads require little more than phone lists by which rank-and-file workers can self-mobilize.

Working Groups. Workers can start class-based working groups within their union around community issues like those mentioned above. Examples from ones I have helped organize include anti-poverty working groups to support poor and unhoused working-class people and Indigenous solidarity working groups supporting active land reclamations.

All of these can access union resources to use in broader struggles beyond the workplace or contract. All while building the strength of less secured workers. One influential example is the green bans in Australia, strikes undertaken by the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) and used to protect parkland and low-income housing.

These straightforward examples provide mechanisms to transfer union resources, which are properly understood as working-class resources, on a class-wide basis to community working class, including Indigenous and ecological, struggles. They also provide venues for educating and motivating fellow workers. The absolute joy I have seen among workers following flying squad actions cannot be properly expressed. It is literally transformative. It is a lighting of what could be called real class consciousness.

If you are not in a union—organize one. However, that might look. Reach out to other workers. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) are always a good option for organizing on a class struggle rather than a contract management basis. Active flying squads from unionized workers can help to put pressure on the boss.

Organize an autonomous flying squad bringing together unorganized workers, unemployed workers, migrant workers, and/or environmentalists. I helped organize an autonomous flying squad along these lines in Toronto and we were often the only outside workers presence at pickets of migrant workers who were outside traditional union structures.

One IWW example is that of IWW-Earth First! Local 1 in northern California, which brought together timber workers and environmentalists in a joint organizing effort based on the shared recognition that clearcut logging destroys vital ecosystems at the same time as it wipes out prospects for workers' livelihoods and communities in the long run. And in the longer run, threatens planetary survival for all but capital.

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