

Environmentalists and workers of the world, unite!

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ENVIRONMENT & ECOLOGY

The conflict between labor and the environment is a neoliberal construct. What we need is a broad coalition that can fundamentally transform production.

A U T H O R

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Nowadays it sounds so familiar, almost natural: the mutually exclusive demands and apparently opposing agendas of labor and the environmentalist movement. But in fact, this artificial division is nothing more than a crucial neoliberal strategy to divide two of the most powerful social movements of the industrial era, whose alliance could be a dangerous liaison with the capacity to call into question the very essence of the capitalist “treadmill of production.” It is thus essential that labor and environmental/public health organizations gain a historical perspective on their current state of conflict and become aware of the revolutionary potential of a common political project.

One place where this fact has become much clearer in recent years is the Italian city of Taranto, Apulia, where a number of citizens’ organizations and “committees” emerged in response to one of the most serious occupational, environmental and public health crises of the last decade. These organizations and committees have now begun mobilizing different resources and forms of action — from **cyber-activism** and **film-making** to **street demonstrations** and **campaigning** — to fight against the occupational blackmail of a local employer. At the last May Day celebrations, they managed to gather more than 100,000 people for a self-organized, crowd-sourced mass concert, held in open competition with the one traditionally organized in Rome by the trade unions confederation and RAI, the national public television.

L I B E R A T E T A R A N T O !

As the biggest and one of the oldest steel factories in Europe, counting about 20,000 employees in 2012 and belonging to the formerly state-owned ILVA group (now controlled by the Riva family), the Taranto plant rose to national attention in 2011. A court decision found the company guilty of outrageous violations of environmental regulations and ordered its immediate closure until a thorough technical renovation and the environmental clean-up of damaged areas would be put into place.

The company’s response consisted in arrogantly restating the incompatibility of environmental regulation with its economic plans, thus re-enacting the occupational blackmail strategy which has traditionally functioned as way to structurally block any actions against business interests. The management even went so far as to actively organize workers’ demonstrations against the court decision, gaining ample and complicit media coverage, in order to convince public opinion that there was in fact real opposition in the city of Taranto — in which ILVA is by far the largest employer — against the public prosecutors and local environmentalist organizations.

Taranto is just one striking manifestation of the unbearable contradiction forced upon people of what Allan Schnaiberg has called the “treadmill of production” (and consumption and waste): the contradiction between production and reproduction. This can be imagined as a Hydra-like monster with many heads: occupational illnesses, job accidents, environmental contamination and ecocide, public health disasters, the annihilation of possibilities for alternative/autonomous forms of local economy, and so on. For the past 50 years, this monster has provoked an unbearable **concentration of cancer**, malformations and other health disorders in the Taranto bay area, something rendered even more unbearable by the weakness of public health infrastructure and the lack of adequate healthcare. Like the Alien of the science-fiction movie, the Hydra-like monster has now entered the local space and people’s bodies, taking possession of them from within.

In important ways, Taranto’s May Day concert was therefore a manifestation of discontent with what the organizers (and much of the city’s inhabitants) perceive to be the politics of the main trade unions in matters of ecology: 1) they are seen to be largely complacent with corporate occupational blackmail; 2) they are insensitive to the threats to public health that come with environmental contamination; and 3) they often strongly oppose grassroots environmental mobilization at the local level.

The truth, however, is that it is simply impossible to separate or to alienate life from work — as the industrial economy and society have tried to do for so long. Another type of economy must be built; one that makes work the human activity that sustains life and that all members of a community share in its different forms across space (the city, its sea, its hinterland, and the local ecosystem), and even across species, in respect for the daily work made by non-human nature in sustaining life in the local environment.

Another type of economy is undeniably, urgently needed. All the rage, the frustration, the pain and the conflict that working-class communities of industrial areas have embodied and carried in their lives must now lead towards a new horizon of struggle, a new and better dream than those fabricated by the market and the neoliberal state, and by the unions and political parties associated with them. A dream that can finally liberate local people from the unbearable contradictions of the “treadmill of production”; of the Alien within. The slogan *Taranto libera!* (“liberate Taranto!”) which was screamed again and again during the concert, spoke to just that.

I N S T R U M E N T S O F L I B E R A T I O N

But for another world to become possible, it has to be imagined first, not only by individuals or activist groups, but also at the political level. Imagining a new world becomes essential for the struggle not to close in on itself and reproduce the contradictions of the old world, but to become constructive and hopeful. Here it is that political memory becomes essential, as a project of activist knowledge-production which engages with the world’s transformation as an instrument to usher in new possibilities for politicization. By becoming aware of what has already been done by other people, past and present, with their struggles and movements, either in our own communities or elsewhere, we will immediately get a much clearer perception of the possibility of not just one but many other worlds.

Seeing those possibilities in their reality, with their dreams and their challenges, with their victories and their contradictions, will help us envision our own possibilities here and now and better organize our own struggles. This is the contribution that this article aims to give to all those who are struggling for self-liberation from the straitjacket of occupational blackmail. In the following part, I will “unearth” a few stories, in the hope that they may become (figurative) axes of war, as the Wu Ming writers’ collective would put it: instruments of liberation operating through the political imagination.

Worker/environmentalist coalitions operating on common platforms of labor and political struggle are not uncommon in the history of the post-war world. When truck drivers and eco-activists **marched together** in the streets of Seattle during anti-WTO demonstrations in 1999 under the banner of “Teamsters and turtles”, this was nothing new, but simply the resurgence of a political strategy that had already been successfully experimented with during the Fordist era, leading to important legislative reform in occupational and public health as well as in environmental protection. It was the active collaboration between labor, environmental, student and feminist movements that allowed the passage of the Clean Air and the Clean Water Acts (1972) in the USA, strongly supported by the most powerful trade-union confederation of the time, the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW).

In Italy, the very institution of the Public Health System (*Sistema Sanitario Nazionale*) in 1978 was the result of a decade of intensive struggles and two general strikes, promoted by what was known as the “environmental club” within the unions’ confederation: a coalition of labor physicians, sociologists and union leaders who had previously produced revolutionary

changes in the regulation of the work environment, promoting the principle of direct workers' control (articles 4 and 9 of the Labor Statute, passed in 1970).

Other relevant examples of such strategic coalitions can be drawn from very different places and economic sectors, such as the successful struggle against pesticide use that was conducted in the mid-1960s by the United Farm Workers union, organizing the Latino wage laborers of the orange fields and vineyards of California to obtain decent working and living conditions and the recognition of labor rights. A struggle centered on the serious health threats that agro-chemicals posed not only to the farmers and their families, but to the American consumer and environment at large.

But perhaps the most striking example of workers' environmentalism can be found in the deep of the Amazon rainforest of Brazil, where, in the mid-1980s, a union of rubber tappers — the *seringueiros* — **successfully organized** to defend the forest from the attack of powerful lumber companies and ranchers, while at the same time defending their right to live and work in the forest, forming cooperatives for the management of sustainable extractive activities, such as rubber and nut collection or fisheries. Despite the violent opposition raised by powerful local interests, leading to numerous assassinations of trade unionists and environmentalists, the rubber tappers' struggle did succeed in obtaining the creation of a number of "extractive reserves", where landless local people are legally recognized and supported by the state as the legitimate "owners" and safeguards of the forest.

What the above stories tell us is that it is indeed possible to build *social* struggles that are, at the same time, *environmental* struggles, even though they emerge from a working-class experience, and vision, of what ecology is.

M O R E S O L I D P R E M I S E S

However, the renewed alliance between labor and environmental movements must be rebuilt on more solid premises than in the past. The ideology of economic growth as a panacea for all social problems and the only way to produce social welfare must be thoroughly questioned and ultimately abandoned by the labor movement, because growth imperatives are powerful justifications for the most shameless disregard for the well-being of people and of non-human nature. The same applies to the illusion of greening the economy (i.e., capitalism) through eco-efficient technologies and market mechanisms; an illusion embraced by large parts of both the labor and the environmental movement, with support from governments and financial institutions.

The process of de-industrialization in "developed" countries in the last 20 years shows how the greening of the economy has led to the simple transmigration of industrial hazards and their death toll to less developed countries, acting through the ferocious logic of the "double standard" regime, by which multinationals can shift abroad those productions/technologies which are banned or heavily regulated in their countries of origin. This same mechanism makes working-class communities in the first world more and more vulnerable to occupational blackmail, threatening them with the shifting of industrial activities elsewhere.

Moreover, many of today's so-called "green" technologies actually have a very negative impact on the environment, on labor conditions, and on public health as well, especially when implemented on a large scale — a fact that has been demonstrated by grassroots struggles (and engaged research) on a number of such "green economy" projects over the last decade. Windmill parks, for instance, have been strongly opposed by local communities in Greece and Spain due to the impact they have had on extended rural areas, altering local climates and landscapes, as well as heavily conditioning land use patterns.

Even greater impacts on soil, local climate and ecosystems are associated with large solar power plants — also an object of contestation and a cause of serious occupational hazard. But the most striking example comes from the biofuel business in Brazil (and elsewhere in Latin America), where extensive monoculture plantations of sugarcane have replaced millions of hectares of forest, and are often run through semi-slave laborers working in conditions of horrible toil and health risk.

Clearly, the point is not to cynically dismiss any form of alternative energy production as equally threatening to environmental and public health. There is no doubt that renewable and non-fossil energy sources must be developed as the only possible way out of the current climate crisis. But the issue of dimension and scale is of fundamental importance: alternative energy can and should be developed on the small scale, aiming at autonomous and decentralized forms of self-provision for households and local communities. Renewable energy technologies can be really sustainable only if implemented at such a de-centralized and locally-controlled level, even if this is not the scale at which huge concentrations of profit (and political power) can be made. But this would imply a thorough transformation not only of the form and structure of urban life, but of

the social organization of work itself.

Breaking out of the multiple crises that afflict the world today — both in the domains of the economy and work as well as in the domain of ecology and public health — requires no lesser effort than completely abandoning the “treadmill of production”, including the politics, economics and ideology of unlimited growth. This requires an ecological revolution as theorized by Carolyn Merchant: a complete shift in the social organization of production, reproduction and consciousness. Another way of working and living, of producing and distributing wealth, rooted in non-alienated work, in respect for life and in commonality, must be the political platform on which to build this new alliance. Workers and environmentalists of the world, unite!

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