

Canadian Working-Class Environmentalism, 1965–1985

Katrin MacPhee

Volume 74, automne 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060923ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

MacPhee, K. (2014). Canadian Working-Class Environmentalism, 1965–1985. *Labour / Le Travail*, 74.

Résumé de l'article

Les historiographies du mouvement ouvrier canadien et du mouvement écologique ont largement négligé l'existence d'une conscience écologique propre à la classe ouvrière au Canada entre 1965 et 1985. Ce militantisme environnemental d'origine ouvrière s'est exprimé dans trois stratégies distinctes mais interdépendantes. Tout d'abord, dans les années 1960 et jusqu'aux années 1980, les militants syndicaux ont mené des recherches indépendantes sur les contaminants environnementaux présents dans leur milieu de travail, lesquels sont par la suite libérés dans l'environnement. Deuxièmement, certains syndicats canadiens se sont constamment efforcés de chercher à contraindre différentes branches du gouvernement canadien à adopter et à appliquer des politiques et des règlements stricts en matière d'environnement. Troisièmement, les membres de syndicats canadiens ont fait usage des moyens dont ils disposaient – la négociation collective, les manifestations et les grèves – pour prévenir les dommages causés à la santé humaine et à l'environnement. Grâce à une analyse de ces luttes, je décris un militantisme environnemental issu d'une analyse sociale de la santé et de la maladie d'une société capitaliste.

ARTICLE

Canadian Working-Class Environmentalism, 1965–1985

Katrin MacPhee

WORKERS AND ENVIRONMENTALISTS, socialists and greens, trade unions and ecologists: according to a predominant strain in contemporary social and political thought and practice, each of these paired categories is irremediably distinct from and largely opposed to its counterpart. Pointing to prominent instances of worker-environmentalist conflict in Canada, the two groups' agendas are often portrayed as incompatible and occasionally openly hostile toward one another. Indeed, the "jobs vs. the environment" theme is by now a hardy perennial of Canadian politics.¹ Much of the existing historiography mirrors these divisions by separating environmental history from discussions of class and labour.

This paper aims to penetrate divisions in the discourse and historiography to argue instead for the existence of a distinctly working-class environmental consciousness in Canada between 1965 and 1985. Drawing on contemporary newspapers, union minutes and reports, the back files of the *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News*, and the strike and lockouts files of the Department of Labour, I submit an interpretation of a distinctly worker-generated environmentalism born largely out of a class analysis of health and disease under capitalism.²

1. See Bill Tieleman, "Going Green Brownd Off Key NDP Votes," *The Tyee*, 4 March 2014, theyee.ca/Opinion/2014/03/04/BC-NDP-Rejects-Resource-Sector/; Keith Wiley, "Tieleman's 'Dinosaur Thinking' on Jobs vs Nature," *The Tyee*, 17 March 2014, <http://theyee.ca/Opinion/2014/03/17/Jobs-vs-Nature> (both accessed 17 March 2014).

2. *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* is a publication dedicated to reporting workplace deaths and injuries, events, and legal action surrounding occupational health and safety matters.

Before a new conception of environmentalism can properly be proposed, the current interpretation of the term ought to be dissected. Environmentalism can often seem like a slippery, hazy term encompassing the views of a wide variety of coalition groups from a broad array of ideological perspectives.³ Writing in 1989, Robert C. Paehlke claimed that the mainstream environmentalism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was curiously apolitical, neither left nor right on the political spectrum. In practice, it often took the form of loose coalitions in opposition to particular projects. Paehlke himself acknowledged that many of environmentalists' central propositions, such as limiting economic growth, were likely to only appeal to those with "a reasonable degree of economic security ... only rarely does it appeal to the economically insecure."⁴

A more recent examination of environmentalists in BC also grappled with the movement's political alignment. The authors of the study uncovered a rich variety of often-contradictory beliefs and principles.⁵ Indeed, in light of their findings, it seems to make more sense to speak of environmentalisms rather than one singular movement. Nonetheless, the authors were able to sketch some general patterns of belief. While many positioned themselves as left-wing and critical of global capital, most simultaneously rejected central pillars of left-wing thought. In particular, most did not oppose capitalism itself, nor did they prioritize the redistribution of wealth. While many supported egalitarianism in theory, they disapproved of the equal distribution of wealth when pressed and praised the concept of private property. An area of firm common ground for the interviewees was a faith in the power of positive lifestyle choices, such as a diet of organic food.⁶ Implicit within such discourse is a liberal, individualist vision of societal change through consumption choices.

Based on a case study of Gary, Indiana, historian Andrew Hurley argued that environmentalism's mainstream incarnation has largely been the domain of the relatively affluent. While ecological discourse has claimed to represent all social groups, bourgeois individuals are those most able to partake in the health, leisure, and consumerist fruits of an emergent environmental orientation.⁷

3. Mark McLaughlin has defined environmentalism as "an acute sense of awareness of humanity's interconnectedness with and impacts on natural environments." Mark McLaughlin, "Green Shoots: Aerial Insecticide Spraying and the Growth of Environmental Consciousness in New Brunswick, 1952–1973," *Acadiensis* 40, 1 (2011): 7. McLaughlin's work makes apparent that in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, before global warming became widely recognized as the most pressing environmental issue, pollution was generally considered the most urgent environmental problem for those with environmental awareness.

4. Robert C. Paehlke, *Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 8.

5. Debra J. Salazar and Donald K. Alper, "Beyond the Politics of Left and Right: Beliefs and Values of Environmental Activists in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 121 (Spring 1999): 7–14.

6. Salazar and Alper, "Beyond the Politics of Left and Right," 14–26.

7. Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 10.

While a bourgeois conception of environmentalism has become hegemonic in recent decades, this paper aims to follow Hurley's call for a broader perspective on environmentalism "beyond the narrow formulation advanced most forcefully by middle-class activists."⁸ In arguing for a working-class environmental consciousness largely outside the realm of middle-class norms, I present a vision in this paper of environmentalism rooted in class dynamics.

Making individual choices the crux of environmental activism fits neatly within the liberal framework. Companies and states insist that each worker wishing to pursue compensation for exposure to industrial pollution must do so through individual workers' compensation claims. Individual compensation claims splinter resistance and are more easily rejected on the spurious grounds of personal history. By forcing redress along individualist channels the state and corporations obscure the class-based nature of pollution and minimize social responsibility. Workers subverted the assumption that pollution is experienced as a matter of individual health and not collectively by examining the environmental conditions of whole communities and exercising social solidarity during strikes. Today, a similar threat to liberal hegemony is discernable in Indigenous environmentalism. Indigenous peoples' insistence on their group rights appears to be a crucial factor in making their vision of environmental activism the most powerful in modern Canadian politics.

Since the environment became a popular topic of historical inquiry, several Marxist theoreticians have attempted to wed a class analysis with discussion of how humans have interacted with the natural world.⁹ Despite these attempts, some labour historians have written of environmentalism as a middle-class movement blind to the concerns of working-class people. Conversely, environmental historians have sometimes written of workers who oppose environmental regulation at such places as Clayoquot Sound as mere "ventriloquists" of capital.¹⁰ Overviews of divisions within the fields by historians Richard White and Gunther Peck confirm the depth and persistence of the split between environmental and labour history.¹¹

8. Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*, 12.

9. For interpretations of Marx's ecological thought, see Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); *Marxism and Ecological Economics: Toward a Red and Green Political Economy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006); John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

10. John-Henry Harter, "Environmental Justice for Whom? Class, New Social Movements and the Environment: A Case Study of Greenpeace Canada, 1971–2000," *Labour/Le Travail* 54 (2004): 83–116; Rod Bantjes, *Social Movements in a Global Context: Canadian Perspectives* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2007): 259.

11. In the US, Richard White has articulated some of the perceived fault lines between environmentalists and workers, as well as their theoretical origins. Richard White, "Are you an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 171–185. Gunther Peck's analysis of labour and environment history's intersections and discords

American historians Donald Worster and Timothy Mitchell implied that both labour and environmental historians have much to learn from Marx, who in *Capital* posited that the alienation of labour estranges a person's body from his or her activities as a worker, a process of estrangement that parallels that which separates humanity from the natural world under capitalism.¹² A similar emphasis on the intersections of labour and the environment can be found in US working-class history as it has recently been explored by Andrew Hurley and Laurie Mercer.¹³ In Canada, Laurel Sefton MacDowell, Joseph Glen Moore, Eryk Martin, Lloyd Tataryn, Thomas Dunk, and Robert Storey number among the scholars who demonstrated how Canadian environmental and labour history can be interwoven.¹⁴ These writers suggestively underlined the contradictory position in which workers in resource industries find themselves – experiencing, as Martin explains, profound bonds with nature at the same time they are required to sustain themselves through “an appropriation of nature that challenges the very notions and idealized representations

concludes, “There remains little ‘nature’ in labour history and few working-class subjects in environmental history.” Gunther Peck, “The Nature of Labour: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History,” *Environmental History* 11, 2 (Apr., 2006), 213.

12. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London and New York: Verso, 2011). Worster was engaged in debate by prominent environmental historian William Cronon in the 1990s, who argued against strictly materialist interpretations of the environment and social relations. Mitchell applies Worster's arguments to global carbon-based energy systems and claims that the nature of coal production, being labour-intensive and concentrated, made it vulnerable to strikes and other forms of labour organizing. He theorizes that the real impetus for the switch to oil-dependent economies derived from its nature as a less labour intensive mode of production. Oil was therefore less likely than coal to become a site of class conflict.

13. Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*; Laurie Mercier's study of the copper smelting company town of Anaconda, Montana explores working-class agitation surrounding capitalist pollution of local environmental health. Laurie Mercier, *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana's Smelter City* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

14. Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Greening the Workplace: Unions and the Environment,” in *Sustainability, The Challenge: People, Power, and the Environment*, ed. L. Anders Sandberg and Sverker Sörlén (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998), 167–174; Robert Storey, “From the Environment to the Workplace and Back Again? Occupational Health and Safety Activism in Ontario, 1970s–2000,” *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 41, 4 (November 2004): 419–447; Lloyd Tataryn, *Dying for a Living* (Ottawa: Deneau and Greenburg, 1979); Joseph Glen Moore, “Two Struggles into One? Labour and environmental movement relations and the challenge to capitalist forestry in British Columbia, 1900–2000,” PhD Thesis, McMaster University, 2002; Eryk Martin, “When Red Meets Green: Perceptions of Environmental Change in the B.C. Communist Left, 1937–1978,” MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 2006: 166; Eryk Martin, “Canadian Communists and the Politics of Nature in British Columbia, 1937–1956,” *Twentieth Century Communism* 5 (Summer 2013), 105–115; Thomas Dunk, “Talking about trees: Environment and society in forest workers' culture,” *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 31, 1 (February 1994): 22.

they have come to cherish.”¹⁵ Dunk succinctly describes the woodworkers of Ontario as “living in and against nature.”¹⁶

Of course, environmental historians are correct to be attentive to circumstances in which environmentalists and workers have clashed over opposing interests. Such has been the case repeatedly throughout recent Canadian history. The historiography surrounding these divisions is most developed for British Columbia. Historians Jeremy Wilson, Gordon Hak, and Richard Rajala have all written of the oftentimes environmentally destructive actions of forestry union workers.¹⁷ A monograph narrating the history of the International Woodworkers of America outlines various points at which the union felt compelled to confront environmentalists and argue against stronger environmental regulations.¹⁸ Wilson and Hak have indeed argued for an interpretation of forestry workers as aligned firmly with capital against environmentalists in the late 20th century.¹⁹

Rather than arguing for a monolithic pro- or anti-environment working class, it is more useful to be sensitive to the particular circumstances in which workers have either rejected or embraced environmentalism and to be attuned to the various dynamics at play during specific conjunctures. Laurie Mercier’s study of the smelter workers of Anaconda, Montana, achieves such a nuanced approach through examining the various scenarios in which the local union pressed for or against stronger pollution laws. In doing so, she illustrates the double vulnerability of workers in extractive industries, particularly in single-resource towns. While physically susceptible to disease working amid industrial pollution, they are also economically vulnerable, lest the industry should scale back or end production. She skillfully examines the balancing act carried out by the workers in that community caught between these dual perils.²⁰

Alexander Simon’s insightful examination of the environmental records of two forestry workers’ unions draws welcome attention to the influence union organization can exert on environmental activism. His comparison between the International Woodworkers of America and the Pulp, Paper, and Woodworkers of Canada suggests that a democratic structure, a confrontational approach to

15. Martin, “Red Meets Green,” 166.

16. Dunk, “Talking about trees,” 22.

17. Jeremy Wilson, *Talk and Log: Wilderness Politics in British Columbia, 1965–96* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998); Gordon Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934–74* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 169; Richard Rajala, *Clearcutting the Pacific Rain Forest: Production, Science, and Regulation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 224.

18. Andrew Neufeld and Andrew Parnaby, *The IWA in Canada: The Life and Times of an Industrial Union* (New Star Books, 2000), 215, 224.

19. Wilson, *Talk and Log*; Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry*, 169.

20. Mercier, *Anaconda*, 182–207.

management, and a tolerance toward radicals within their ranks are factors favourable to union environmentalism.²¹

Similarly, writings on the United Fishermen and Allied Workers (UFAW) further complicate working-class environmentalist discourse by illustrating the tumultuous history of this union's exchanges with environmentalists. It has found itself as bedfellows with organizations such as the Sierra Club in a campaign for stricter forestry regulations (in the name of protecting waterways and aquatic life), a conflict which placed it in opposition to forestry workers and their unions.²² At another point, the UFAW found its own industry on the receiving end of environmental criticism from Greenpeace.²³ At yet another point in time, it formed coalitions with other unions and environmental groups in opposition to environmentally destructive projects.²⁴

Workers as well as many other Canadians responded to the transnational sea-change in the 1960s, often associated with Rachel Carson's publication *Silent Spring* of 1962, which alerted much of the world to the environmental consequences of industrial capitalism. By 1965 the environmental movement was gaining strength throughout Canada. Although environmentalism waxed and waned in popularity as new issues surfaced and sank back to relative obscurity, Canadians polled in the mid-1980s consistently ranked the environment as a top priority, a matter of great concern.²⁵

As Robert Storey's work has demonstrated, some of the most compelling instances of environmental health activism arose in the context of workplace health struggles.²⁶ Often, workers were driven to activism by their sense that they unjustly bore a disproportionate burden of industrial disease. Their bodies were the testing sites wherein the toxicity of materials later released into our common environment were determined. Moreover, workers often lived in close proximity to the contaminating factories and industries that polluted their bodies every day. They directly appreciated the impact of pollution on themselves and their loved ones. In this period, some argued that they could in fact be forces of environmentalism because as workers they

21. Alexander Simon, "A Comparative Historical Explanation of the Environmental Policies of Two Woodworkers Unions in Canada," *Organization and Environment* 16 (Sept. 2003): 288–93.

22. Richard A. Rajala, "Forests and Fish: The 1972 Coast Logging Guidelines and BC's First NDP Government," *BC Studies* 159 (Autumn 2008): 90–109.

23. Mae Burrows, "Allied Forces," *Alternatives Journal* 24 (Fall 1998): 18.

24. Daniel Tatroff, "Deep River Blues: A BC Union's Fight to Save the Fraser," *Our Times* (February/March 1994): 27–29.

25. Laurie Adkin, *Politics of Sustainable Development: Citizens, Unions, and the Corporations* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998), 3–19.

26. Robert Storey, "From Dust to DUST to Dust: Asbestos and the Struggle for Worker Health and Safety At Bendix Automotive," *Labour/Le Travail* 45 (Spring 2000): 103–140; Robert Storey, "Activism and the making of occupational health and safety law in Ontario, 1960s – 1980," *Policy and Practice in Occupational Health and Safety* 1 (2005): 41–68.

could both observe pollution and take direct action to halt it. Workers were in uniquely vulnerable and privileged positions. Any assumption they were acting on the basis of “narrowly-defined” issues flies in the face of their own acute awareness that their worksites were not isolated islands unto themselves, and that the pollution to which they were exposed on the job would eventually seep into the larger environment.

Environmental consciousness was far more widespread among workers and within their movements than the existing literature allows. This orientation was undoubtedly present within left-wing unions and among rank-and-file militants, but it also can be found in fairly mainstream organizations and among career trade unionists nationwide. The national scope of the movement is evident in the active participation of national and provincial labour federations, such as the Canadian Labour Congress, and the enthusiastic formation of geographically dispersed coalitions by various unions to address particular environmental issues. Moreover, the wide-ranging struggles engaged in by the locals of certain unions, such as the United Steelworkers of America, suggest Canadian labour activists in the 1960s through the 1980s considered environmental health an issue worthy of sustained, collaborative mobilization.

An important theoretical distinction deserves to be made regarding working-class environmentalism and the occupational health and safety activism that did so much to provide Canadian workers with protections on the job for life and limb. The lines between these movements can be rather foggy, a fact that serves to illustrate the centrality of health to conceptions of environmentalism. In Storey’s writings on the occupational health and safety movement, he claimed that their divergent class interests necessitate viewing the workers’ movement as separate from middle-class environmentalism.²⁷ Departing from this proposition, I propose a slightly different theoretical framework. Rather than seeing environmentalism as the exclusive purview of bourgeois interests, I perceive that working-class concerns about industrial pollution bled into a wider environmental consciousness outside the bounds of the workplace.

Historians Jessica van Hourssen and Christopher Sellers have argued that in a working-class community setting where workers and families literally live in the shadow of a polluting industry, distinctions between occupational and community health are rather senseless.²⁸ In van Hourssen’s words about Asbestos, Quebec, “the link between environmental, occupational, and public health is obvious.”²⁹ Building off this insight, a clear point of departure between

27. Storey, “Activism and the making of occupational health and safety law in Ontario, 1960s – 1980.”

28. Christopher Sellers, “Factory as Environment: Industrial Hygiene, Professional Collaboration and the Modern Sciences of Pollution,” *Environmental History Review* 18 (Spring 1994): 58–61; Jessica van Horssen, “‘À faire un pea de poussière’: Environmental Health and the Asbestos Strike of 1949,” *Labour/Le Travail* 70 (Fall 2012): 101–102.

29. Van Horssen, “À faire un pea de poussière,” 102.

occupational health and safety movements and working-class environmentalism, in my mind, is the point at which workers took their health struggles beyond the physical boundaries of the workplace to involve their larger communities. The workers who form the subjects of this study did just that, in settings as geographically distinct as Baie Verte, Windsor, and Yellowknife. Not only did they often involve communities within their epidemiological studies or strikes over environmental health issues, but they often formed coalitions with non-working groups for legislative changes.

A second qualm I hold with neatly separating environmental activism and occupational health and safety struggles is the seeming surrender in doing so to bourgeois conceptions of environmentalism. As Andrew Hurley has eloquently argued in reference to Gary, Indiana, “divergent historical experiences and social objectives generated competing environmental agendas, not all of which fit neatly into the programmatic package set forth by the Sierra Club ... and other organizations dominated by affluent whites.... Simply measuring commitment to environmental reform against a middle-class standard is inadequate.”³⁰ As such, I propose an expansive definition of working-class environmentalism encompassing struggles over pollution at the point of production. While concerns about industrial pollution on the job may appear as workers simply acting in their self-interest and not in the interest of the broader environment, I hold that they are just as legitimate a reflection of concern about the natural world as more traditional forms of protest.

If an environmentalist is one who theorizes what a healthy relationship between humankind and the natural world might look like, who critiques practices damaging that relationship, and acts on the basis of that critique – then many rank-and-file workers and a substantial number of their unions were “environmentalists.” Regardless of whether a given union articulated its arguments in precisely the same form used by its “environmentalist” contemporaries, it was, insofar as it undertook these actions and sustained these critiques, engaged in environmental activism.

The workers’ activism was expressed in three separate but interrelated strategies. First, labour activists undertook independent research projects about the environmental contaminants present in their own workplaces and subsequently released into the larger environment. Often, these studies concerned both emission levels and the potential consequences of the pollution upon human health. Second, a number of Canadian unions consistently endeavoured to compel branches of the Canadian government to adopt and enforce strict environmental policies and regulations. And third, Canadian union members exercised the weapons at their disposal – collective bargaining, demonstrations, and strikes – to prevent harm to environment and human health alike. Focusing on workers in resource-based communities, this article

30. Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*, 12.

seeks to complicate a received and oft-told story about the opposed ‘interests’ of labour and environmentalism.

I. Barefoot Epidemiology: Workers as the Organic Intellectuals of a New Environmentalism

EXPOSURE STANDARDS FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES are seldom set prior to their industrial production. Rather, they are developed once patterns of disease among workers and exposed populations become too glaring to ignore.³¹ In the second half of the 21st century, the vast majority of Canadians laboured in a state guided by the philosophy that a substance is harmless until proven otherwise. From 1965 to 1985, we find numerous occasions of workers, often critiquing the conditions of their own lives, struggling to create new bodies of scientific evidence and theory to challenge those favoured by business and the state. They were joined by some writers on medical issues and even by some dissident doctors, who could readily grasp the life-threatening implications of contemporary capitalism.³²

Yellowknife provides an excellent example of such a struggle. By the 1970s, workers and residents in Yellowknife were increasingly suspicious that the arsenic released as a by-product of gold mining was responsible for the recently perceived rise in local cancer rates. Yet their convictions were dismissed by government officials. One from Health and Welfare deemed the link between cancer and arsenic exposure “doubtful.” To substantiate this claim, government health officials quickly released a record of recent arsenic emissions from Falconbridge’s Giant Gold Mines smokestack, the largest mining facility in the region, which gave readings 400 per cent lower than Falconbridge’s own admitted figures.³³ The government’s actions demonstrate what Canadian unions seemingly realized on various occasions in the time period under investigation: research was often employed to smooth the way for polluting industries and to delegitimize workers’ concerns about environmental contaminants. The drive on the part of unions to perform their own studies can be understood as an attempt to democratize science and, in a sense, to redeem its objectivity.

31. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 1. “Controls Needed for Workplace Carcinogens,” *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 6, 3 (January 24, 1983): 3.

32. For classic critical studies of capitalism and health, see Vicente Navarro, *Crisis, Health and Medicine: A Social Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); *Dangerous to Your Health* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993). The presence of health issues in left-wing circles in Canada is described in Jean-Philippe Warren, *Ils voulaient changer le monde: le militantisme marxiste-léniniste au Québec* (Montréal: vlb éditeur, 2007), 45. Warren describes how his leftist subjects perceived poor health, including maladies caused by pollution, as rooted within social relations and hence remediable through new social policies and solutions.

33. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 124–126.

As early as 1961, the United Steelworkers of America's (USWA) Canadian National Office was urging its members to monitor patterns of illness within their own locals and to report any suspected cases of occupational disease. The national health and safety committee warned that industrial disease, caused by exposure to myriad chemicals whose health effects were mysterious, was both a longstanding and intensifying problem for workers. In the words of a 1961 policy report, "we are already faced with some 5000 chemicals used in industry and new ones are being introduced at the rate of 500 a year." Perhaps inspired by this exhortation or perhaps largely in response to illness and pollution observed first-hand, several USWA locals launched investigations into their workplace environments.³⁴

As outrageous as the Canadian government's denial of arsenic's carcinogenic properties – a denial made ridiculous by over a century of medical case studies – was the decision to obscure the results of a 1966 study performed by the National Health and Welfare office on the health impacts of arsenic on Yellowknife residents. The study discovered that arsenic levels in the city were ten times higher than the allowed threshold and that inhabitants were suffering from cancer as well as respiratory and nervous disorders at elevated rates. The study remained an "internal document," unavailable to the public, for years.

In 1969, the federal government built a pipeline to change the source of the city's water to one drawing further away from sources of arsenic contamination. The pipeline did not extend to Yellowknife's Latham Island Indigenous community. Local residents had to wait until the spring of 1974 for a sign – in English only – warning Indigenous peoples about water contamination. This blatant disregard of the health of Indigenous inhabitants contributed to the outrage that erupted when, in 1975, the CBC attained and released the findings of the government's study. On the left, *Canadian Dimension* gave publicity to this and other environmental questions of urgent significance to workers.³⁵ This was no narrowly conceived "labour issue." Workers at the Giant Yellowknife Gold Mine, long concerned about their own daily contact with arsenic, allied with members of the Dene Nation. In turn, the USWA and the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB, an umbrella organization of federal and regional First Nations organizations, now titled the Assembly of First Nations) conducted a joint study of their members to assess the health implications of arsenic exposure. These allied groups then sought and secured the assistance of University of Toronto researchers and launched a thorough examination of arsenic levels in hair samples of smelter workers and local Indigenous children.

34. United Steelworkers of America Canadian National Office, Director's Office, National Policy Conference 1961, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC) MG28 I 268, Volume 2.

35. Robert Sass and Richard Butler, "The Poisoning of Canada," *Canadian Dimension* 16, 2 (March 1982): 4–6. "Arsenic Danger in Yellowknife Hinted in Secret Ottawa Study," *Globe and Mail*, 9 January 1975.

Many samples examined contained arsenic levels 50 times above the World Health Organization's designated "safe" standard. The study also found, contrary to the Health and Welfare officer's claim, that Yellowknife's cancer rate was twice the national average. One of the University of Toronto biologists involved declared Yellowknife to be "probably the most severely arsenic-contaminated area in the world."³⁶

In 1977, the NIB and the USWA held joint press conferences in Toronto and Yellowknife to reveal their findings. USWA's environmental representative, Paul Falkowski, released a critique of government practices throughout the ordeal, one well worth quoting:

The federal government's attitude is to use the worker's body to monitor the contamination level of his work environment. In my opinion, when you start finding pollution in the people's bodies it's too late. The best way to protect human health is to carefully monitor the environment, not people. If cancer-causing agents are found in the environment, then they should be eliminated. The unsafe conditions should be altered before they are exhibited in people's bodies.³⁷

The federal government countered with a new study of its own, completed with methodologies widely criticized as flawed, such as volunteer sample donors.³⁸ The authors claimed that no clear-cut evidence of acute or chronic poisoning had been found among the city's inhabitants and once again argued that arsenic could not be definitively deemed a carcinogen. In its view, "a cancer death rate above the national average ... [was] unrelated to arsenic exposure."³⁹ Unpersuaded by this state "evidence," the NIB and the USWA considered the preparation of the government study to be little more than a delaying tactic.⁴⁰ Finally, in October 1978, Environment Canada backed down in the face of continuing pressure and announced its intention to create stricter regulations surrounding arsenic emissions from gold processors.

In this case, working-class consciousness of injury and exploitation – of specific industrial processes damaging the bodies of workers – was transformed over time into a more all-embracing critique of the state abuse of science, one which also could be aligned with the intensifying consciousness of the Dene Nation. When workers protested the damage pollution was doing to their

36. Sass and Butler, "The Poisoning of Canada," 5; Victor Malarek, "Yellowknife Arsenic Level 'Horrendously High,'" *Globe and Mail*, 17 January 1977.

37. Quoted in Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 135.

38. Victor Malarek, "Arsenic is Called No Threat to Residents of Yellowknife," *Globe and Mail*, 15 September 1977; Malarek, "Yellowknife's Arsenic Enough to Poison World, Inquiry Told," *Globe and Mail*, 29 March 1977, p. 10.

39. Canadian Public Health Association, *Task Force on Arsenic, Final Report* (Ottawa, December 1977): 66; "Arsenic Report Saying Yellowknife Safe Assailed," *Globe and Mail*, 7 June 1977.

40. Victor Malarek, "U.S. Expert Denounces 'Sloppy' Federal Study of Yellowknife Arsenic Contamination," *Globe and Mail*, 4 January 1978.

persons, they were also necessarily engaging in a struggle against the political and economic structures that made that pollution possible. And in mounting that struggle, they looked and found allies both in Indigenous communities and in the academic community.

In Kitimat, British Columbia, workers at an Alcan aluminum smelter were similarly concerned about their workplace's health hazards. Downwind of the smelter, a band of dead trees and vegetation one mile wide stretched onward for twenty miles down the length of the Kitimat valley. The company and the Canadian Forest Service had long blamed an insect infestation for the scene of devastation, but union members wondered why no similar infestation existed elsewhere and why the vegetation in question displayed a high fluoride content. The violence to the external environment was mirrored by the damage to the smelter workers' bodies. Many workers experienced breathing difficulties, and union members required bone surgery in numbers that seemed far too high to be coincidental. In 1977, the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers (CASAW) conducted an independent study into the health of its local members. The study contained shocking revelations about extraordinary changes to skeletal structures provoked by heavy exposure to smelter toxins. Moreover, fluorides were demonstrated to cause significant pulmonary irritation and airway obstructions. According to a *Canadian Dimension* article on the study, the report became "known world-wide" and gave the union leverage to demand the introduction of new technology that would reduce worker exposure to pollutants.⁴¹ In 1985, CASAW convinced the BC Cancer Control Agency of the necessity of studying Kitimat Alcan workers' collective cancer rates, and the workers' compensation board was forced to recognize fluorosis as an industrial disease warranting compensation.⁴² Workers in Kitimat, like those in Yellowknife, concluded that the government failed to impose pollution emission standards adequate to protect human health and that they needed to initiate discourse-shifting research. And so, like their fellow labour activists in Yellowknife, they developed scientific expertise and accessed a scientific language, all to contest the implicit agenda of researchers working for the industry.

It should not be surprising that asbestos miners in Quebec were aware early on about the environmental and health problems of industrial contamination. As early as 1918, North American insurance companies were so certain

41. Wiho Papenbrook, "Fighting for a Healthy Workplace in Kitimat," *Canadian Dimension* 16, 2 (March 1982): 14–15; "Past Alcan Workers Exposed to Smelting Hazards, Says Report," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 3, 12 (June 9, 1980): 2; "No Definite Skeletal Fluorosis Found Among Alcan Kitimat Workers," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 4, 11 (June 1 1981): 1; "News Summary," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 4, 8 (April 20, 1981): 5.

42. "BC Smelter Workers Subject of Cancer Study," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 8, 29 (22 July 1985): 3; Neal Hall, "Smelter, Bronchitis Linked in Kitimat," *The Vancouver Sun*, 14 November 1987.

that high levels of asbestos exposure shortened one's life that they refused to insure asbestos miners.⁴³ By 1949, the devastating consequences of asbestos exposure were well known to the workers. Yet, although the Asbestos Strike of 1949 has been widely trumpeted by historians of Quebec nationalism as a prelude to that province's Quiet Revolution and by labour historians as one of the most significant of Canada's post-1945 strikes, they have overlooked the environmental agenda raised by the asbestos workers.⁴⁴ Contemporary press coverage suggests "les conditions inhumaines" was the primary force motivating workers toward militant action.⁴⁵ Jessica van Horssen's recent study of the strike argues strongly for the centrality of environmental health issues to the dispute.⁴⁶ Indeed, a contemporary account of the strike's settlement noted that it did not address dust levels, to the "bitter objection" of miners, a result that the journalist argued portended future disputes.⁴⁷

As predicted, a sequel to the health-oriented militancy in the Asbestos-Thetford Mines region came in the 1970s. And as in Yellowknife and Kitimat, an essential element of their struggle concerned access to scientific knowledge. Miners still lacked access to statistics from companies and the provincial government concerning the levels of asbestos dust in which they laboured. Worker-led asbestos research began in Canada in the 1970s largely as a crusade on the part of a passionate miner. Paul Formby worked for several years in the Yukon's Clinton Creek asbestos mine and served as his union's health and safety representative. Frustrated that his company refused to provide union members with information about the exposure levels they experienced and denied the union the right to perform its own tests, Formby turned to the environmental science laboratory at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York for help. The hospital's researchers informed Formby about the impact of asbestos upon human health and taught him how to perform air samples for the substance. Formby departed soon after to apply his new skills to the epicentre of world

43. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 14–5.

44. The most substantial study of the strike was published by Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1956, in which he claimed the strike was a reflection of tumultuous social change within Quebec, particularly with regards the diminishing influence of the traditional Catholic Church and the turn to the left of some Catholic trade union leaders and members. In a more recent study, Fraser Isbester expanded Trudeau's argument to claim that the strike can be understood as "the key which unlocked the door to the quiet revolution." Pierre Elliot Trudeau, *La grève de l'amiante* (Montreal: Éditions du Jour, 1956). Fraser Isbester, "Asbestos 1949," in *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada 1919–1949*, ed. Irving Abella (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1974), 163.

45. "Sentences arbitrales rendues concernant 3 mines de Thetford," *Le Devoir*, 16 December 1949. Miners quoted within the article expressed their disappointment with the settlement in stating, "les conditions inhumaines" in the mines were not addressed by the agreement.

46. Van Horssen, "À faire un pea de poussière," 101–32.

47. "Arbitration Award in Asbestos Strike May Stir New Unrest," *Ottawa Evening Journal*, 16 December 1949.

asbestos production, Thetford Mines. Once he notified the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) of his plans, the organization agreed to support the study. When Formby arrived in Quebec, he encountered miners such as Mr. Gardiner who had experienced illness for decades and was willing to risk being fired to help perform clandestine testing. Gardiner was interviewed by the *Globe and Mail* in 1980. Against a backdrop of slag heaps, locally called "the dumps," Gardiner recalled, "I've got so much asbestos fibre in my lungs that when I tried to sign up for the war, they looked at my lungs and told me I had tuberculosis and they wouldn't let me in, so I went back to this mine."⁴⁸

Formby provides a striking example of the new working-class drive to counter official scientific knowledge. He ventured back to the west coast to collect samples from his (now) former workplace, Clinton Creek, and another mine in Cassiar, British Columbia, which were sent back to Mount Sinai Hospital for analysis. The researchers' findings surprised many workers who had long been reassured by company doctors that they were perfectly healthy. A full 75 per cent of those who had given the mines 40 years or more of their lives suffered lung abnormalities, most in the form of cancer or asbestosis. After the CBC publicized these statistics, the miners mounted an eight-month strike, one that was almost entirely about environmental questions.⁴⁹ Formby credited the miners with becoming "sampling experts" themselves.⁵⁰

A similar contestation of the "scientific" consensus in the 1970s and 1980s can be found among autoworkers. Members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in that period were openly concerned about the dangers workplace pollutants posed to many workers in Windsor. They also focused on the environmental hazards confronting the entire community. In 1979, the UAW co-hosted a public forum about asbestos hazards. Although the rates of lung cancer and asbestosis at the Bendix brake fitting plant were the primary focus of attendants, the union also expressed anxiety over that company's dumping of asbestos into the neighbourhood air and the city sewer.⁵¹

In March 1981, the UAW representative at a Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) conference presented his union's own version of "barefoot epidemiology." As

48. Tataryn, "Dust of Death: A Detective Story," *Globe and Mail* 23 October 1976; Richard Cleroux, "Roy 'Nice Guy' but Liberal Has Edge," *Globe and Mail*, 22 March 1980. "Quebec WCB Protects Firms, Liberal Says," *Globe and Mail*, 25 April 1975. This article quoted local physicians employed by the mines, who admitted they "deliberately withheld the truth from workers afflicted by asbestosis."

49. Tataryn, "Dust of Death." Hubert Bauch, "More than Half of Thetford Labour Force is Idle," *Globe and Mail*, 1 April 1975. Reported Bauch, "They have gone on strike for better pay and improved conditions in the mills and mines, which the men say are primitive in terms of safety regulations elsewhere ... Many men in their mid-50s who have been in the mines all their working lives spit up blood every morning."

50. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 23.

51. Gary McArthur "Exposure to Asbestos: A Certain Death!" *Canadian Dimension* 14, 7 (June 1980): 37.

he distributed copies of the UAW booklet *The Case of the Workplace Killers: A Manual for Cancer Detectives on the Job*, Jim Gills explained the importance of encouraging workers to launch their own research into occupational cancer risks.⁵² Workers were called upon to cut through scientific jargon and bureaucratic language to liberate their own way of interpreting reality – to create a “worker-oriented way of approaching and using statistics and other scientific material.”⁵³ The manual stressed the importance of closely observing levels of suspected carcinogens to which workers faced exposure and disease patterns, as well as the need to recognize early symptoms of illness.

The Windsor case suggests how working-class issues, handled aggressively and energetically by a trade union local, could also be conceived of as environmental issues that spoke to Windsorites who were not directly employed by the auto industry. The communication to the public surrounding asbestos pollution in local air and sewage was one way in which industrial pollution’s community impact was illustrated by the union. The Windsor Occupational Safety and Health Council (WOSH) was an organization committed to demystifying the relationships between environmental pollution, industrial disease, and community health. It was formed in the spring of 1979 by three health and safety representatives very active in Windsor within their respective unions after they met during the public forum on asbestos. The organizers were struck by the possibility of creating a community organization that would tackle health and safety issues both within the workplace and throughout the city as a whole. The resulting group was an alliance between workers and city residents, and much of their work revolved around exposing the links between workplace pollution issues and city-wide health concerns.⁵⁴

In 1982, WOSH published a *Worker’s Guide to Health and Safety*, which managed to be both rich in detail and pocket-sized for convenient workplace consultations. The guide argued that modern workers suffer contact with “over 200,000 chemicals now used in the workplace, only 1% of these have had standards developed for worker exposure acceptable to the government.”⁵⁵ If standards were too low, then workers should struggle to change them. The

52. Michael Silverstein, *The Case of the Workplace Killers: A Manual for Cancer Detectives on the Job* (Detroit: United Auto Workers, 1980). This manual was authored by a UAW member who noticed several of his colleagues in their model building shop had developed cancer. He suspected a carcinogen in their workplace was to blame. He appealed to his local for help from the broader union. The UAW responded by helping them hire an epidemiologist, who, along with union members, collected data for a proportional mortality study. They were subsequently able to point to several likely carcinogens and press for improved ventilation in their workplaces.

53. “Special report: UAW Program Shows how to investigate Cancer Hazards,” *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 4, 6 (March 23, 1981): 3.

54. Gary McArthur, “The Story of W.O.S.H.” *Canadian Dimension* 14, 7 (June 1980): 40.

55. Cecilia Deck, John Jackson, and Hawley Shields, eds., *A Worker’s Guide to Health and Safety* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1982), 1.

authors cautioned workers not to trust “researchers commissioned by your company or others in the industry to do health studies,” as “they may be biased.” Workers were advised to “[a]void these sources” and “instead, find out what various impartial, reliable authorities reveal about the substances and processes you use.”⁵⁶ WOSH members followed up this guidebook with one specifically on the dangers of diesel fume exposure.⁵⁷

The organization was also quick to set an example of the independent research it wanted others to perform. After receiving numerous comments from plastics plant workers about respiratory problems, skin disorders, and severe nosebleeds, among other worrisome symptoms, the WOSH organized a pan-city meeting of plastics workers. Sensing that a collective approach was necessary to avoid individual plant closures in the labour-intensive plastics industry, the group convinced a local doctor interested in occupational health to create a medical questionnaire for the plastics workers. The medical analysis that followed sustained the afflicted plastics workers’ case for compensation.⁵⁸ WOSH became a model for other city-wide coalitions on environmental and occupational health issues. Similar organizations were founded throughout the early 1980s in Hamilton, London, Guelph, and Vancouver. As in Windsor, these groups became forums for many interested in health and safety and sparked alliances between trade unionists, environmentalists, doctors, and a variety of public interest groups.⁵⁹

The WOSH, like Paul Formby and like union activists in Kitimat and Yellowknife, strove to create a worker-oriented approach to scientific research. Sharing a conviction that government and industry-led studies of pollution and health often served to obscure tangible threats to working-class health, these activists sought to democratize scientific research. Moreover, the case studies demonstrated a well-developed awareness on the part of unions that their health issues were not neatly delimited by the boundaries of the workplace but constituted matters of concern for everyone breathing the local air and drinking the local water.

56. Deck, *A Worker's Guide to Health and Safety*, 32.

57. “Diesel Exhaust Hazards Described for Workers,” *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 6, 33 (22 August 1983): 4.

58. McArthur, “The Story of W.O.S.H.” 42.

59. “COSH Committees: Education and Advocacy,” *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 6, 45 (14 November 1983): 1. In Sarnia, the question of mercury pollution was raised repeatedly by the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers union and also by the local New Democratic Party, one of whose prominent standard-bearers was also a leader of the OCAW and a militant in Sarnia’s ‘Chemical Valley.’

II. Lobbying for Political Change

IF A CONFRONTATIONAL VISION of environmentalism gained some of its initial impetus in such labour struggles, it was also brought into the public square, repeatedly, by working-class activists seeking to transform the everyday assumptions of Canadian politics. Many of the independent investigations into environmental health questions described above were undertaken not only to explain disease rates but also to provide impetus for shifts in policies and regulations. By offering their bodies as evidence of a substance's destructive power, working-class activists articulated powerful demands for enhanced government supervision of industry. On various other occasions, both activists and unions in Canada have pushed enthusiastically for alterations in government practices, even without performing their own research prior to their calls for change.

The USWA in Canada was a trailblazer in demanding better regulations regarding occupational and environmental health. Workers, the union declared as early as 1961, should enjoy the right to refuse unhealthy or unsafe work.⁶⁰ Articulated in the pervasive liberal language of "rights," the demand had potentially grave implications for capital, since it vested in workers the moral right, even obligation, to withdraw their labour-power when they suspected a menace to health or safety. In 1966, the policy resolutions at the USWA national conference included a demand for relief from water pollution from the Sydney local. The resolution's preamble argued that the matter demanded "effective controls for the future" and "immediate clean-ups." It also placed the financial liability for such remedial actions on the shoulders of the industries "guilty of creating pollution."⁶¹ The Sydney steelworkers would be unrelenting protagonists for the next two decades in the struggle to obtain redress for those suffering from that city's tar ponds. In the early 1970s, some of the most impressive USWA activism was elicited by the situation in uranium-based Elliot Lake, Ontario, since 1949 an archetypal Northern Canadian resource town. In the early 1970s, miners began sharing their personal histories of cancer struggles with politicians and journalists. Miner Gus Frobels researched the issue for years. He compiled a long list of his fellow dead or dying miners. He became the first miner to convince the traditionally skeptical Ontario Workers' Compensation Board that his lung cancer had been occupationally created. Another miner willing to publicize the dangers of uranium mining was Garry Toner, who spoke to a *Globe and Mail* reporter about "coughing black muck out of his lungs all morning."⁶² Such speeches led Stephen Lewis,

60. United Steelworkers of America Canadian National Office, Director's Office, National Policy Conference 1961, Resolutions, LAC, MG28 I 268, Volume 3.

61. United Steelworkers of America Canadian National Office, Director's Office, "Policy Resolutions of 1966," LAC, MG28 I 268, Volume 3.

62. Gerald Seniuk, "Case Histories of Suffering from Elliot Lake's Mines," *Globe and Mail*, 17

then leader of Ontario's New Democratic Party, to accuse the mines engineering branch of the ministry of "criminal negligence."⁶³

In 1974, the Conservative Ontario government launched a Royal Commission into "The Health and Safety of Workers in Mines." The USWA responded with an intensive campaign. They submitted testimony about the need to reform health and safety laws and the compensation system with such enthusiasm that the report's authors singled the union out in their introduction: "[T]here are the major institutions ... in issues related to the health and safety of workers in mines. Each of them has been subjected to sharp criticism by labour unions, and particularly by the United Steelworkers of America."⁶⁴ An unnamed union representative issued perhaps the bluntest statement in the entire report: "[W]e have been led to believe through the years that the working environment in these mines was safe for us to work in. We have been deceived."⁶⁵ The Royal Commission's recommendations eventually led to the passing of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* of 1978, which granted Ontario workers the right to refuse unsafe work. Some journalists and historians have credited the miners' testimony to the Royal Commission for the passing of this legislation.⁶⁶ What might have been construed as a "local issue" pertaining to particular workers had been translated over time into a legal right for all workers, one with potentially serious consequences for their employers.

The environmental implications of such activism merit emphasis. The upshot of much USWA activism surrounding uranium's cancer-inducing properties was to make uranium mining itself an object of controversy. In the late 1970s, to mine or not to mine for uranium was a hotly contested question in British Columbia. By 1979, the USWA had joined with the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers and several environmental and public health-oriented organizations in opposition to uranium extraction in that province. The coalition pointed to an estimated "hundreds" of uranium miners in Ontario and Saskatchewan dead from lung cancer and silicosis and to mining companies' track record of rampant pollution. In a hearing on the issue, the USWA and the British Columbia Federation of Labour criticized the Atomic Energy Control Board (the national body responsible for the uranium deposits) for having "weak and unenforced regulations."⁶⁷ In 1980, British

June 1974. "Miner Objects to Company Stand on Radiation as Cancer Source," *Globe and Mail*, 19 June 1975.

63. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 72.

64. James Ham, Commissioner, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Health and Safety of Workers in Mines* (Ottawa: Government of Ontario, 1976), 5.

65. Ham, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Health and Safety of Workers in Mines*, 77.

66. Mick Lowe, "Miners Win Fight-A Decade After Walkout," *Globe and Mail*, 23 April 1984.

67. "Uranium Mining," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 3, 4 (February 18,

Columbia announced a seven-year moratorium on uranium mining. A union-based critique had led to pioneering environmental legislation.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, unions also struggled to maintain and improve Canada's health and safety laws. The Atomic Energy Control Board first proposed increases to the legal doses of radiation to which workers could be exposed in 1977. The relaxed safety standards would permit workers to receive radiation doses between 120 per cent and 400 per cent higher than those allowed under existing regulations dating from 1959. By 1983, the proposed changes provoked the formation of the Radiation Sub-Committee of the CLC's Health and Safety Committee made up of a variety of labour organizations.⁶⁸ This coalition contested the proposed changes, arguing that revelations about the astronomical lung cancer and silicosis rates among Elliot Lake miners ought to have been leading to a radical enhancement of existing safety standards not the planned deregulation of an industry whose regulations had already proved lax to the point of negligence.⁶⁹ Despite this activism on the part of labour, Canadian radiation standards of exposure were reduced in the 1980s.⁷⁰

Pesticide spraying in British Columbia mobilized widespread collaborations as well. According to *Canadian Dimension*, by 1978, the UFAW Union, the British Columbia Farmworkers' Association, the BC Federation of Labour, and the BC Government Employees Union had coalesced with many environmental and Indigenous groups into the "South Okanagan Environmental Coalition." The group first applied pressure on the provincial government to eliminate the spraying of an herbicide suspected of causing drastic damage to British Columbia fisheries, particularly its salmon stock. The organization then

1980): 2. John Moeleart, "Uranium for B.C.: Yes or No?" *Canadian Dimension* 13, 6 (November 1979): 25.

68. It was a coalition of union representatives from the USWA, the Ontario Hydro Employees Union (nuclear plant workers), the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC, whose members were involved in isotope production), the Energy and Chemical Workers Union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE, whose members were medical workers, often exposed to large doses of radiation), and representatives from the BC and the Alberta Federation of Labour.

69. Tony Webb, "Radiation Health and Safety-Unions Fight De-Regulation," *Canadian Dimension* 18, 4 (Jan./Feb. 1986): 33.

70. Cathy Vakil and Linda Harvey, "Human Health Implications of the Nuclear Energy Industry," *Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment*, May 2009, <http://cape.ca/human-health-implications-of-the-nuclear-energy-industry-2/>, accessed 23 March 2014. Joy Parr has written in depth about the lived experience of Canadian nuclear power plant workers. Her study emphasizes the extent to which risk and the alien, dangerous nature of nuclear materials weighed upon the workers. Joy Parr, "A Working Knowledge of the Insensible? Radiation Protection in Nuclear Generating Stations, 1962–1992," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48 (Oct. 2006): 827–830.

appealed all 28 of the spraying permits granted by the government.⁷¹ Unless a substance was known to be safe, the group declared that it should not be sprayed on the province's fields, forests, waterways, or highways.

By the 1980s, the Canadian trade union movement was confidently proclaiming its chosen role as a defender of environmental health. It was a confidence born within but not confined to the context of occupational health and safety hazards. Victor Rabinovitch, the CLC Workplace Health and Safety Program Officer, expressed this point of view clearly in a speech in 1981. In a public forum on eco-toxicity, Rabinovitch spoke of the need to see the workplace and the environment as one and the same. Neither workers nor the general public should be sacrificed in the name of profit. The first step to alleviating environmental degradation would hence be to enforce regulations governing workplace pollutant exposure.⁷²

Many members of Canadian unions lacked this faith that the Canadian government could so radically alter business priorities. Indeed, many unionists in this period argued that government and industrial interests were inextricably linked. Larry Gauthier, a member of the WOSH and the Windsor Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, issued a scorching indictment of government behaviour. After describing years of failure on the government's part to enforce adequate occupational health and safety laws, Gauthier stated, "Ontario workers and their counterparts in the rest of Canada will continue to pay in their health as long as this government inaction and collaboration with industry is allowed to continue."⁷³ On occasions such as these, where unionists had abandoned hope that government was willing to use regulations to protect environmental health, unions used the weapons uniquely at their disposal: strikes, work stoppages, and bargaining demands.

III. Striking for Rights

INDUSTRIAL ACTIONS ARE, AS MANY SCHOLARS and militant workers agree, the key to workers' power.⁷⁴ Workers are often placed in a legal conundrum with regard to pollution issues. Their employers might demand that they perform environmentally damaging acts, even break the law. Yet, if they resist, they might well lose their jobs and find they have little support from the

71. John W. Warnock, "Dow Still Kills," *Canadian Dimension* 13, 6 (December 1978), 24. "2, 4-D Dangerous, B.C. Report Says," *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 1981. This article quoted Jay Lewis of the South Okanagan Environmental Coalition about the report, which the group authored. The report claimed that exposure to the herbicide could cause genetic defects.

72. "Solving Ecotoxicity Problems Depends on Linking workplace, Environment," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 4, 7 (6 April 1981): 3.

73. Larry Gauthier, "An Insider's View," *Canadian Dimension* 14, 7 (June 1980): 41.

74. Terence G. Ison, *Occupational Health and Wildcat Strikes* (Kingston: Queen's Industrial Relations Centre, 1979), 2.

government or from the public. Although laws passed in the 1970s technically guaranteed workers the right to refuse unsafe work, the line between safety and danger was often a blurry one, made blurrier still by confusion over the dangers posed (or not posed) by particular substances.

One of the earliest actions of the 1970s took place on the south coast of Newfoundland in another single-industry town with a troubled history of militancy and industrial disease.⁷⁵ The plight of St. Lawrence gained widespread national attention due to the “terrible beauty” of the testimonies captured in Elliott Leyton’s oral history of the community’s experiences with lethal radiation-laced dust from the local fluorspar mine.⁷⁶ According to Rick Rennie’s more recent account of “industrial disease and conflict,” health and safety was the focus of company-labour conflict since the mine’s inception in the 1930s.⁷⁷ Decades wore on and radiation contamination was discovered in the town’s water. Occasional walkouts led to a Royal Commission on industrial disease in the town; yet, the government failed to implement any of the commission’s recommendations that might have tangibly improved environmental health.⁷⁸

In 1971, miners and their supporters decided sustained, direct action was necessary. The day the union announced a strike, women within the community picketed the town’s loading dock to prevent the company from launching a shipment, stating they did not want normal trading to undercut the union’s bargaining position. The ship eventually left without loading.⁷⁹ On a May afternoon, women took over the picket line as the miners marched through the town’s streets. The protesters carried a coffin and a “cancer symbol” to the cemetery at town’s edge. One striker’s banner demanded a “Special Fund for Sick Miners and Widows.”⁸⁰

The town of St. Lawrence thus stands as a sobering but powerful testament to worker mobilization motivated by environmental health. As Rennie has

75. John R. Martin, *The Fluorspar Mines of Newfoundland: Their History and the Epidemic of Radiation Lung Cancer* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012). Gary Handrigan, “Life and Death in a Small Town: St. Lawrence, Newfoundland,” *New Maritimes*, 11, 4 (Mar/April 1993): 15–17.

76. Elliott Leyton, *Dying Hard: Industrial Carnage in St. Lawrence, Newfoundland* (1975; St. Philip’s, Newfoundland: Boulder Publications, 2004): xv.

77. Rick Rennie, *The Dirt: Industrial Disease and Conflict in St. Lawrence, Newfoundland* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008): 95–109.

78. Fintan J. Aylward, *Report of Royal Commission Respecting Radiation, Compensation & Safety at the Fluorspar Mines*, St. Lawrence, Newfoundland (St. John’s, Newfoundland: Government of Newfoundland, 1969).

79. Rennie, *The Dirt*, 112.

80. Harold Horwood, “Mining as a Way of Death: Human Life and Radiation in St. Lawrence, Newfoundland,” *Globe and Mail*, 31 May 1975. Referring back to the strike, Horwood notes that “Three hundred miners, during a six-month strike in 1971 paraded through town carrying a wooden cross and a coffin which they deposited at the mine gate.”

argued, industrial disease provided the impetus for the formation of a local union. Into the 1970s, the death and disease that haunted the town propelled the workers to strike with the support of community members' direct action. While workers are alienated from their labour through the mechanisms of the market, their lived experience of capitalist production are painfully embodied, as are those of other working-class community members living in the shadow of modern dark, satanic mills.

It was workers' willingness to fight for the cessation of pollution on site that gave a *Canadian Dimension* author writing in 1973 the confidence to baptize trade unions as the "one organized social force" capable of "preventing eco-catastrophe."⁸¹ It is this sense of their own power to protect the environment and health that motivated various Canadian unions to strike, bargain, or take other direct action to prevent pollution from 1965 to 1985. Workers in several asbestos mines across Canada resorted to strikes in the mid-1970s due to the severity of the occupational environmental issues they confronted. Workers at Thetford Mines launched a strike once their independent research confirmed the legitimacy of their environmental health concerns. Less than two weeks after Formby, the maverick mine-testing miner, publicized his findings, 3,500 Thetford Mines workers went on strike. As had been the case with their predecessors in 1949, the "elimination of asbestos dust inside and outside the mills" was their primary demand.⁸² Interestingly, the inclusion of the clause "outside" indicates miners were fearful, not only of the workers' exposure to asbestos, but also of the pollution of the entire community environment.⁸³ The strike dragged on for eight months, but workers did not win the right to monitor their own work environment, the central goal of the strike.⁸⁴ By the time the strike was concluded, the Quebec government announced a judicial inquiry into the province's asbestos industry.⁸⁵ The final report of the inquiry included many provisions for a strengthening of asbestos regulations both inside and outside the mills, such as a 2-fibre per cubic centimetre limit of exposure and an industrial health board run by workers and unions to police conditions in "both the asbestos industry and in other Quebec industries." The board would "enforce health and safety standards and constantly update industrial health regulations."⁸⁶

81. "Ecology: Trucking in Beautiful B.C.," *Canadian Dimension* 9, 6 (July 1973): 14.

82. "Asbestos Policy Copies Mine, CNTU Charges," *Globe and Mail*, 14 April 1975. According to this coverage of the dispute, "protection against asbestosis" was the theme of a mid-strike rally of 4,000 strikers. Speakers demanded a 2-fibre per cubic centimetre limit on asbestos exposure.

83. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 39.

84. "Asbestos Unions Cut Demands to End Strike," *Globe and Mail*, 7 August 1975.

85. "Two Year Pact Ratified by Asbestos Workers," *Globe and Mail*, 18 October 1975.

86. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 55.

Baie Verte, jutting in a peninsula off Newfoundland's northeastern tip and nestled between sea and rolling hills, is ordinarily a tranquil corner of the world. Only a few thousand souls call the town home and many of them arrived with the discovery of asbestos deposits in the region in the mid-1950s. As such, many residents are often haunted by the same complex web of dependency that those living in single-industry towns everywhere experience. Perhaps it was an awareness of the vulnerability of Baie Verte's existence that made a strike there in 1978, predominantly over health and safety issues, appear somewhat sudden and surprising to outside observers. Author Lloyd Tataryn, writing of the strike, characterized the events as an "eruption of militancy."⁸⁷ A *Canadian Dimension* reporter, seeking to contextualize the strike she described, attributed the struggle to a medical investigation that had documented exceptionally high rates of lung disease among miners and community members alike. The Newfoundland government declined even to meet the widely decried low standards of Thetford Mines.⁸⁸

The 510 miners of USWA Local 7713 went on strike in the beginning in February 1978.⁸⁹ It was a struggle largely unconcerned with monetary matters, since negotiations surrounding wage and pension increases had been settled before it began. The strike stands, then, as one of the clearest examples of Canadian labour militancy exclusively focused on health and environmental issues. According to Martin Saunders, the president of the steelworkers' local, "there's a mountain of tailings that have gone up over the natural height of the land and higher than the trees. When the wind is blowing in the right direction it blows dust into towns 30 and 40 miles away."⁹⁰ The miners and the community members who backed them demanded that Johns-Manville company's Advocate Mine contain the asbestos dust from their operations rather than let it circulate freely through the town.⁹¹ They also demanded increased ventilation and several measures to prevent the spread of asbestos dust from the workplace to the community, such as on site laundry facilities and a car wash.⁹² In this struggle, the conventional line between a "labour" and an "environmental" issue was erased.

87. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 45.

88. "Baie Verte Miners Strike," *Canadian Dimension* 13, 3 (1978) 13. The workers themselves had first conducted air sampling tests, before turning, like asbestos miners in Thetford Mines and elsewhere in Canada, to more extensive research conducted by Mount Sinai Hospital researchers in New York. Newfoundland and Labrador Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission (NLWHSCC), *Registry of the Former Workers of the Baie Verte Asbestos Mine: Final Report* (April 2013): 4, 41.

89. "Strikes and Settlements: Advocate Mines," *Globe and Mail*, 11 February 1978.

90. "Mine Wives March in Health Protest," *Globe and Mail*, 1 May 1978.

91. Tataryn, *Dying for a Living*, 45.

92. NLWHSCC, *Former Workers of the Baie Verte Asbestos Mine*, 39.

Three months into the strike, with no end in sight, over 1,000 community members marched in columns through the town's streets behind women bearing a coffin, following the precedent of the people of St. Lawrence seven years before. The white coffin, symbolic of the death and disease haunting the town, was paraded to emphasize the dire need for the miners' militancy. Organizers argued that a disproportionate number of the town's residents suffered from respiratory illnesses. Children suffered from an unusual number of colds, and many endured severe bronchitis due to what locals called "the insidious dust."⁹³ The hard-fought strike forced the company to accede to the workers' demands in late May. USWA local president Saunders called the strike a success, telling *Globe and Mail* reporters that the miners won all the health and safety measures they had demanded, such as a watering system to control dust at a waste dump.⁹⁴ The strike's importance in helping workers mitigate some industrial disease was demonstrated in a health study of the mine's employees published in 2013. The researchers specifically mentioned the strike as a landmark explaining shifts in disease rates over time.⁹⁵

From 1965 to 1985, many Canadian union members clearly perceived that the unique tools at their disposal – collective bargaining sessions and strikes – could be used to protect the environment. If the strike is a potent force to stop production and force employers to share their profits, it could also be used to halt pollution. Canadian labour activists in this period frequently bypassed government mechanisms to strike and negotiate with employers directly over pollution matters.

IV. Exceptions or Ancestors?

IT IS TRUE THAT ONLY A MINORITY of strikes from 1965 to 1985 were sparked by questions of environmental safety. Yet, such struggles were significant. They illuminated as few scientific reports or specific policies could the immediate consequences of unregulated capitalism. One measure of the overall impact of labour environmentalism can be found in the positions taken by major national labour federations. Both the *Conseil des syndicats nationaux* (CSN) and the CLC developed pro-environmentalist positions. CSN representatives provided support for activist members both in Thetford Mines and in Baie Verte. The CLC, in addition to supporting specific strikes, played an active role in advocating environmental protection. For instance, it formed a radiation sub-committee in response to the proposed deregulation of the industry.⁹⁶ The *Labour Review* of the CLC developed a consistent and emphatic theme of

93. "Mine Wives March in Health Protest," *Globe and Mail*, 1 May 1978.

94. "3 Month strike Wins Miners Safety Clauses," *Globe and Mail*, 22 May 1978.

95. NLWHSCC, *Former Workers of the Baie Verte Asbestos Mine*, 39.

96. Webb, "Radiation Health and Safety-Unions Fight De-Regulation," 33.

environmental activism, especially in the 1970s. For over two years, between 1970 and 1972, every single issue of *Labour Review* contained an article on worsening environmental degradation. The articles strove to do more than alert their readers to pressing problems – they urged such readers to consider what the labour movement could do to remedy the crisis.⁹⁷ They also praised unions that took environmentalist action, such as when the United Farm Workers' Union included standards for pesticide use in their bargaining demands – a position the publication described, not only in labour terms, but as a blow against looming “eco-catastrophe.”⁹⁸

Moreover, the CLC collaborated with the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) to host seminars on the “Campaign Against Pollution,” which focused on workplace organization against industrial pollution, for students in all of Ontario's community colleges.⁹⁹ The CLC's publications and actions demonstrate how labour environmentalism constituted more than a series of isolated local actions. It can be considered part of a national pattern, an emergent project affecting the entire labour movement and uniting many different communities.¹⁰⁰ Evidence of deliberate and widespread union collaboration surrounding environmental issues were displayed in previous discussions of broad-based coalitions on particular issues, such as uranium mining in British Columbia and national radiation exposure standards.¹⁰¹

Another important theme glimpsed throughout this study was the formation of coalitions and alliances between unions and community groups. To repeat only two examples previously mentioned in the body of this paper, they included the fruitful alliance between the USWA and the NIB in Yellowknife

97. “Montreal–Toronto Rivalry: Big Cities Vie for Pollution Stakes” *Labour Review* 9 (March/April 1970): 9; “Eco-Catastrophe,” *Labour Review* 9 (May/June 1970): 5; “Popullution,” *Labour Review* 9 (July/August 1970): 6; “Every Day is Survival Day but October 17th is Something Special!” *Labour Review* (September/October 1970): 5; “Campaign Against Pollution,” *Labour Review* 9 (November/December 1970): 3; “The Price of Progress,” *Labour Review* 10 (January/February 1971): 6; “Pollution and Jobs,” *Labour Review* 10 (March/April 1971): 4–9; “Report on the OFL Conference on Pollution,” *Labour Review* 10 (November/December 1971): 8; “Oppose Commercial Projects in National Parks,” *Labour Review* 10 (May/June 1972): 8.

98. “Eco-Catastrophe,” *Labour Review* 9 (May/June 1970): 5.

99. “Every Day is Survival Day but October 17th is Something Special!” *Labour Review* (September/October 1970): 5.

100. This commitment to environmental activism continued past the time period studied. In 1989, the CLC's Occupational Health and Safety Committee formed a sub-committee exclusively devoted to the environment. Among other advocacy, this committee “ten-point program for the environment, which called for workers' environmental rights, a worker perspective on the environment, stressed the connections between health & safety and environmental protection, and advocated a strong federal authority over the environment.” Dave Bennett, “Labour and the Environment at the Canadian Labour Congress-The Story of the Convergence,” *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society* 10 (Spring 2007): 3.

101. John Moelart, “Uranium for B.C.: Yes or No?” *Canadian Dimension* 13, 6 (November 1979): 25.

and a very productive coalition between workers and concerned individuals in Windsor through WOSH. These coalitions illuminate the broadly conceived environmental concerns of worker-activists in the time period examined. Rather than restricting their pollution agitation to the workplace, they formed alliances to protest its much wider societal impacts. The fact that workers aligned themselves with Indigenous activists on more than one occasion also hints that they conceived of pollution's "racial," as well as class-based, dimensions.

I have focused in this article on the realms of activism, based on many workers' everyday experiences, where labour environmentalism can be most clearly identified. However, it is important to note the connections that activists drew between their own issues and those of their fellow workers throughout the country. Thus, the environmentalist concerns of the CLC and provincial labour federations, combined with the observed collaborations between different locals, suggest a blossoming awareness of the environmentalist potential of a united national labour movement. Often, this perception of a need for worker-oriented environmentalism suggested a distinctly class-based analysis of pollution. Some Canadian union members articulated a sense that they are affected first and most severely by pollution and hence share a common interest in environmental activism. Drawing on persuasive and often gripping evidence, workers reminded Canadians that the class dimensions of environmental degradation are not left at the workplace at the end of the day. Rather, working-class communities living in the shadow of their employers' industries suffer most directly from their polluting activities.

This class-based analysis of environmental activism was often advanced by the workers' initiation of discourse-shifting research. Many of the worker-led or worker-funded studies demonstrated that various branches of the Canadian government were not protecting the health and safety of either workers or citizens in general. Cost-cutting industries and compliant governments, they suggested, could often be discovered in collaboration, to their mutual benefit and to the detriment of workers. Indeed, the very act of performing independent research suggested that the actors involved felt their interests could not be protected by existing elites. Thus, worker-initiated research can be considered a challenge to elite hegemonic control of scientific expertise and, with it, the experts' and employers' monopoly over questions of political economy. Some of the activists whose voices were heard in this study decried how pollutants were considered safe until proven otherwise, the proof derived from dead and dying workers.¹⁰²

It would perhaps be an exaggeration to assert this class-oriented perception of environmental issues was shared equally by all the activists featured in this article. Still, what is common to all the realms of worker environmentalism we

102. "Controls Needed for Workplace Carcinogens," *Canadian Occupational Health and Safety News* 6, 3 (24 January 1983): 1.

have encountered was an implicit challenge to the logic of capitalist production which prioritizes profits over all else. Once one raises questions about pollution – often regarded as a mere “externality” by mainstream economists – the rationality and morality of mainstream economics itself came into question.

I have argued that workers possessed a distinct environmental consciousness in many regions of Canada between 1965 and 1985. Workers across Canada often expressed an understanding of environmental issues mediated through their positions in production. While liberal environmentalism’s mainstream incarnation may focus largely on the consumption choices of individuals, I submit an understanding of environmentalism rooted in class relationships at the point of capitalist production.

This paper is a revision of a Master’s thesis, for which the support of The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Queen’s University is gratefully acknowledged. Genuine thanks are owed to the anonymous reviewers for their very constructive comments. Ian McKay has my sincere appreciation for all the energy and insight he poured into different incarnations of this paper. I would also like to express heartfelt gratitude for Rusty Bittermann’s boundless enthusiasm, guidance, and kindness, without which I may never have become seriously interested in history. Finally, warmest thanks to Mark Culligan for providing all the support, distractions, and wise advice necessary to make writing not only possible, but a joyful experience.