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# Toward a Theory of Union Environmental Politics: Unions and Climate Action in Australia

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## Abstract

Trade unions across a range of countries are engaging in a new environmental politics. This article considers emerging environmental politics among Australian unions who have sought to advance policy efforts to reduce carbon emissions and green jobs while minimizing the social impacts of a more carbon-constrained environment on jobs and regions. Against this background, this article seeks to advance a theory of union environmental politics by considering the organizational constraints unions operate within, their relationship with local communities and governments, and how they have sought to extend their capacities and organizational form through confederations and alliance-building with other actors.

## Keywords

trade unions, environmental politics, union capacity, union organization

## Introduction

Global warming and associated climate change has emerged as the penultimate challenge for the international community. According to most scientific evidence, if greenhouse gas emissions are not reduced the consequences will be catastrophic for life on the planet (IPCC 2007; Garnaut 2008; Stern 2007; Diesendorf 2009). While the international community failed to reach a meaningful and binding agreement for addressing climate change at the 2009 UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen,

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political debate and activism aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions continues. Trade unions, which have a checkered history when it comes to their stance on environmental questions, have emerged as important actors on environmental matters (Burgmann, McNaughton, and Penney 2002; Estabrook 2007; Obach 2004). Evidence for this is found in countries such as the United States, Canada, the UK, Germany, and Australia, where unions are becoming involved in a range of activities associated with “green-collar” job initiatives, efforts to establish “green delegates” within workplaces, and a strengthened engagement with environmental organizations around renewable energy (Snell and Fairbrother, 2010). Through this process, unions have become increasingly entrenched in climate-change politics. Such developments raise the important question: are we witnessing the emergence of a new environmental politics among unions?

In examining this question, this article considers the activity and role of unions in climate-change politics in Australia. It considers the organizational constraints under which unions operate related to the structure and organization of the industries they operate within, the experiences of the union membership, and the specificities of local contexts and communities. In addition, it analyzes how unions have sought to overcome constraints and extend their capacities and organizational form through confederations and alliance building with other nonstate actors, including employers and environmental organizations.

The article begins with a review of the activities of four major unions whose leadership has been active on the environmental front—the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the Construction, Forestry, Mining, and Energy Union (CFMEU—Mining and Energy Division), the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). To extend and locate the argument, three regional case studies, where union positions on environmental questions are being tested, are presented. The first is the Illawarra region of New South Wales where steel industry restructuring has already contributed to large-scale job losses and economic decline. Of note, the regional labor council has developed a Green Jobs Action Plan to revitalize the local economy (Donaldson et al. 2009). The second case study explores recent developments in Victoria’s brown-coal region, the Latrobe Valley, where coal-fired electric generators produce around 80 percent of the State’s electricity and the federal government’s move to introduce an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) is predicted to have a major impact on the region (Latrobe City Council 2009). In the third case study, union environmental politics in the Latrobe Valley are compared with developments in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, where black coal resources serve as the life-blood of the community. These cases raise important questions about environmental politics among unions in Australia, their influence, and the way they are reconstructing themselves as environmental actors.

## **Toward a Theory of Union Environmental Politics**

The theoretical base for examining union environmental politics consists of three related strands. The first strand of argument relates to the positions of individual unions

and their relationship to production relations. It begins from the proposition that waged workers are rooted in production relations, and along with employers they stand to gain from expanding or retaining manufacturing and associated capacities (Schnaiberg et al. 1986; UNEP 2007). Thus, trade unions as institutions are embedded within the social relations of production. They carry with them their own histories and traditions and must respond to particular sets of relations in different sectors and regions according to the occupational composition of their memberships. The implication is that workers and their unions have an enduring interest in job protection. The adequacy of such assessments has been questioned on both theoretical and empirical grounds (see Jones and Dunlap 1992; Goodstein 1999; Hatfield-Dodds et al. 2008). Others note that trade unions are more or less always caught in a tension between two competing pressures, toward “businesslike service organisation” and as an “expression and vehicle of the historical movement of the submerged laboring masses” (Herberg 1943, 406, cited in Hyman 2001, 61) or “sword of justice” and “vested interest” (Flanders 1970, 15-16, cited in Hyman 2001, 61). The argument is that this dualism, in some form or other, is universal in liberal democratic societies, and clearly something that needs to be taken into account when conceptualizing union environmental politics.

The second strand of the argument is that unions are bound in their capacity and organisation by space and time. Unions must take into account specificities of industry, economy, and community (Potier 1986). Increasingly it is argued that union activity in and of their social and economic communities may provide an opportunity for renewal. It has been suggested that coalitions or community unionism (where unions forge alliances with other voluntary organisations or locate themselves specifically within localities), may enable unions to renew and refocus (for a set of recent contributions, see Cockfield et al. 2009; Tattersall 2009; Wray 2009). As this article highlights, union environmental politics, even within the same union, can vary depending upon local circumstances and local relationships established between unions and local state and nonstate actors, including employers and environmental organisations. An understanding of union environmental politics, therefore, requires a recognition of the specific features that define trade unionism but also the particular situations and localities in which unions are locked and located. It is in within these localities that they have potential to engage in specific environmental politics.

The third strand builds upon the first two through a recognition of the organizational and enduring interests of individual unions and local specificities in the ways unions have “sought to build upon and extend collectivism and unity by creating wider organisational forms” (Ellem, Markey, and Shields 2004, 1) by establishing localized inter-union organizations or confederations. Such moves lay the foundation for developing solidarity both within and between unions. When it comes to environmental politics and addressing local circumstances, local unions are likely to work through these confederations or regional labor councils. Such moves involve the reconsideration of the ways that union organize and operate (Fairbrother 2000), the conditions for and the exercise of capacity (Lévesque and Murray 2002), and the formulation and

implementation of union purpose (Snell and Fairbrother 2010). It is within these arguments that environmental politics among Australian unions is examined.

## **Climate Politics in Australia**

Over the past decade there has emerged a growing awareness throughout the international community about the harmful effects of climate change and need to reduce greenhouse gases. On the world stage Australia is a small contributor to overall world emissions, contributing some 1.5 percent of the world's emissions. However, when measured in terms of carbon-emissions per capita or carbon-emissions per economic output, Australia ranks well above the world average and performs much worse than countries like the United States, Germany, Japan, and India (Garnaut 2008; McNeil 2009). This situation is now recognized as a liability for the nation's future economic development as global capital—both financial and productive capital—seeks to reduce their carbon exposure.

In Australia, coal-fired power stations are Australia's single biggest source of greenhouse pollution. Environmentalists are now targeting the coal industry and heavy carbon-emitting industries through well-organized and sophisticated campaigns. The establishment of coal-fired power generation plants and energy-intensive industries that rely on coal-fired generation are now contested.

In the 2007 election, the Australian Labour Party (ALP), with the support of the nation's union movement, made climate change and the need to curb the "carbon diet" (McNeil 2009) a major political issue and one that assisted them in winning office. Since taking office in November 2007, the Rudd-led Labour Government has attempted to expand renewable energy targets and reduce carbon emissions. One of the most significant measures was to set a carbon-emissions reduction target of between 5 to 25 percent by 2020 (amended to 5 percent in light of the failure of the Copenhagen summit) through its Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS)—a type of ETS (Commonwealth of Australia 2008).

These policy initiatives have implications for workers, trade unions, and the communities dependent upon carbon-intensive industries. Smelters, coal-powered electricity generators, paper mills, and other heavy manufacturing industries, which have served as the heartland for union membership for decades, have raised concerns about their economic viability under an ETS. Employers among Emission-Intensive Trade Exposed (EITE) industries are foreshadowing company closures without assistance and compensation from the government to help them in the transition to a low carbon economy (e.g., ABC 2008b). These policies focus the debate for unions in different industries and occupations, with some unions likely to be marginally affected, others benefiting, and others experiencing major change and disruption. It is against this backdrop that environmental politics of Australian unions is analyzed.

## Australian Unions and Environmental Politics

Australia's unions have been active in a range of activities related to climate change including educating their members about global warming; developing policy positions, particularly as they relate to the impact of mitigation measures on industries, employment, and regions; and advocating strengthened renewable energy targets (Snell and Fairbrother 2010). As part of these policy initiatives, there is evidence to suggest that Australian unions are beginning to reengage in new alliances around the issue of climate change; likewise environmental groups are reaching out to unions. To illustrate, the ACTU has joined forces with the Australian Council of Social Services (the major welfare-based NGO), the Climate Institute (a research and lobbying organisation), and the Australian Conservation Foundation (a leading environmental group) to form the Southern Cross Climate Change Coalition (ACTU and ACF 2008). The Southern Cross Climate Change Coalition has been a strong advocate for the expansion of the government's Mandatory Renewable Energy Target. Like the United States' BlueGreen Alliance, the Southern Cross Climate Change Coalition is seeking to advance sustainable development policy initiatives, particularly as they relate to the "green" economy. They have been an active voice in support of the Rudd Government's ETS and commissioning research into green-collar jobs (e.g., ACTU and ACF 2008).

While the ACTU and the state confederations seek to present a united front on these issues, unions in practice are divided, often reflecting the strength of "vested interests" or production and job-related concerns.

### *A Market Solution: The Australian Workers' Union*

The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) is one of Australia's largest and oldest unions. It represents workers across a diverse range of industries from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and mining to the more traditional manufacturing industries. The AWU promotes a partnership-type approach to industrial matters and is seen on the political right of the labor movement. It has been a vocal opponent to strong action to reduce carbon emissions (Diesendorf 2009). Soon after the Rudd Government announced its plans to introduce a comprehensive ETS, the AWU formed an alliance with some of nation's largest emissions-intensive companies, including Rio Tinto, Shell, Alcoa, and BlueScope Steel, to assure them that the AWU was willing to work with them to find ways to reduce their emissions and acquire needed assistance from the Federal Government. According to the National Secretary Paul Howes:

... we know by keeping good jobs in industries like these smelters and refineries here in Australia we are actually helping in the battle against greenhouse gases. (cited in Nichols 2008)

While the AWU has never declared complete opposition to the Rudd-Government's ETS, it takes a position that Australia should only introduce an emissions trading scheme if a global emissions scheme is implemented (AWU 2008a), raising concerns about the "threat of carbon" leakages. The argument is essentially the "pollution-haven" hypothesis (see Goodstein 1999, 55) that emissions-intensive industries will relocate to developing countries with slack environmental standards. They have also argued for a "carbon insurance for workers" whereby if a company receiving free permits goes out of business, the permits pass onto the company's workers who can use them to "set up their own businesses, get training in new job skills, retire, or resettle in new regions where jobs for their skills would be in demand" (AWU 2008b, 1). These policies seek to demonstrate to members the union's commitment to workers.

The AWU is careful not to be seen as one of the "climate-change skeptics" or take a position of protecting jobs at any social or environmental cost. They advocate that the union is committed to environmental concerns and that the union can best serve environmental goals by working with employers to take steps in reducing carbon emissions. The union seeks to assist employers at two levels. At the workplace level, the union seeks to advise management on technical issues that will result in emission reductions. Paul Howes states:

The union needs to take a role in terms of assisting the company reduce emissions . . . It is very important for us to assist the company in using our practical knowledge on the shop floor . . . (Sydney, NSW, July 31, 2008)

Second, the AWU lobbies governments for increased financial support for companies needing to introduce clean technologies. It is through such an approach that the AWU seeks to secure a future for carbon and greenhouse gas emitting industries.

### *A Technical and Political Solution to Job Threat: The Construction, Forestry, Mining, and Energy Union—Mining and Energy Division*

The Construction, Forestry, Mining, and Energy Union (CFMEU) is an amalgamated union consisting of divisions representing workers in the building and construction trades, forestry and forest products, and mining and energy. The forestry division has adopted a jobs-defence position. It has often expressed open hostility toward environmentalists, the Australian Greens, and even the ALP for the positions they have taken on the logging of old-growth forests and pulp mills (see Flanagan 2007). Nonetheless, other divisions within the union have sought to develop more nuanced positions on environmental issues. The Mining and Energy Division, with its strong representation among coal miners, has been one of the most active voices in environmental and climate-change policy debates, launching a range of policy documents and position papers on climate change, emissions trading, renewable energy, and technologies to mitigate against global warming. Tony Maher, General President of the Mining and

Energy Division, has served as public supporter of renewable energy targets and the Rudd Government's ETS.

The CFMEU Mining and Energy Division leadership seeks to demonstrate its commitment to the environment while at the same time assure its membership that their livelihood is not threatened. Tony Maher, for example, likes to make it clear to the union membership, the media and anti-coal campaigners that "Coalmines aren't going anywhere. Power stations aren't going anywhere" (*The Australian*, 2009).

The union's position is that public monies should not be used to compensate heavy polluters and instead has argued for government investment in research and development and technologies. The union places much of the blame for carbon emissions on private enterprise by criticizing them for failing to invest in upgrading their plants and investing in technologies known to reduce emissions. This argument has been used to campaign against power industry privatization in NSW and for calls for the renationalization of the power industry in Victoria. The union has also criticized power companies and their multinational owners for their opposition to an ETS and have accused them of running scare campaigns through the threat of mass lay-offs and company closures if the ETS legislation is introduced.

The CFMEU Mining and Energy Division has lobbied strongly for Federal government funding for geo-sequestration and carbon capture and storage (CCS) projects. Despite CCS technology being technologically unproven and perceived by many to be economically unviable (Diesendorf 2009; McNeil 2009), the union has taken a position that this technology will ensure the coal industry has a long life ahead of it. In a somewhat unusual political move, the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division went so far as to join an alliance with the Coal Association, WWF-Australia and the Climate Institute to lobby for CCS funding. This is seen by some environmental groups as a de facto coal lobby. These lobbying efforts no doubt played a significant role in Australia's state and national governments committing \$2.4 billion to CCS projects (Diesendorf 2009, 39).

### *A Renewable Future: The Electrical Trades Union*

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU), with representation within the power generation industry as well as the commercial and domestic electrical trades, has sought to stimulate discussions about renewable energy that have tended to stall in Australia. Unlike the Mining and Energy Division of the CFMEU, the ETU is a union whose membership is likely to grow from the expansion of renewable energy jobs. In seeking to improve the policy environment for renewable investors the ETU has put forward several government submissions and policy documents in the hopes of influencing policy makers. In a Senate submission on the effects of climate change on employment and training needs, for example, the ETU called on the government to provide improved training for the reskilling of existing electrical workers to work with low-emissions technology and assist in the growth in renewable energy sector (ETU 2008). For the ETU, renewable energy and clean technology jobs is where the future lies for the nation's workers:



The countries and businesses which are able to respond to technological changes and meet emerging needs quickly are the ones that are most likely to build viable industries in the renewable energy sector . . . . When the political signals are right, there will be a massive demand for skilled renewable energy workers. (ETU 2008, 3)

The ETU, following a research visit to Germany, released a report that aimed to convince Australia's state and national governments of the need to provide renewable investors security through improved renewable-energy targets and legislation. This report advocated a Gross Feed-in Tariff as a way to stimulate individual households and private companies to install photovoltaic solar systems (ETU 2009). Like an earlier report commissioned by the ACTU and the ACF (ACTU and ACF 2008), the ETU report argues that moves toward a more energy-efficient and renewable-based economy can provide more local jobs than those lost. This position is well rehearsed among most major unions and the unions have been fairly effective in getting this message into the public arena. In recognition of the challenges that some industries and communities may confront in a carbon-constrained environment, the ETU advocated locating associated renewable industries in localities that are dependent upon nonrenewable energy sources and are threatened. These proposals are increasingly attractive to local branches of unions and regional labor councils located in Australia's carbon-exposed regions.

### *An Industrial Policy: The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union*

The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), which represents workers in all areas of manufacturing including food and confectionary, metal and engineering, paper, printing and packaging, and vehicle assembly, argues for a comprehensive industry policy, laying the foundation for a just transition. Like the AWU, the AMWU is a union that is likely to lose membership if carbon intensive industries reduce or close their operations. In contrast to the AWU, the AMWU is considered by some environmentalists to have the strongest union environmental policy (DSP 2009). The AMWU has worked to evaluate membership views on climate change, environmental policy and their perceptions about jobs in light of environmental policy decisions such as the ETS through surveying its membership. Of note, a number of unions have used this survey data to inform and gauge support for their environmental policy positions. The AMWU takes a robust position on climate change in its communications with its members:

The situation is dire and the timeframe is short . . . . current modes of resource extraction, manufacturing and transportation are unsustainable and need to be replaced. (AMWU 2008, 1)

In distinct contrast to the AWU's position, the AMWU maintains that Australia should not wait for international agreements for reducing carbon emissions to be established before setting up a carbon-reduction scheme. In response to concerns about "carbon leakage" to "pollution haven" countries, the AMWU recommends a carbon tariff against goods imported from other countries that:

. . . refuse to enter an international agreement on climate change or ignore their responsibilities under such an agreement . . . The environment should not be sacrificed on the altar of free trade. (AMWU 2008, 10)

The AMWU sees the future of Australia's manufacturing sector being driven by the development of the green economy and sustainable industry. It is through the expansion of these sorts of industries that the union hopes to rebuild its membership, which has declined substantially over the past decade as a consequence of the country's declining manufacturing base. The union support for the government's Green Car Innovation Fund and the commitment to spend \$35 million on the development of a hybrid car by Toyota is an example of putting this industry policy into practice (AMWU News 2009).

The AMWU maintains a position that industrial planning and market intervention will be required to deliver the necessary changes in the economy. The AMWU's "blueprint for a sustainable manufacturing future" calls upon governments to

Adopt interventionist industry policies, inclusive of government purchasing policies, support for research and development, skills training, and the take-up of appropriate technologies. (AMWU 2008, 3)

For those workers and communities detrimentally affected by a carbon-constrained environment, the union outlines a "just-transition" policy whereby specific funds and mechanisms are directed to these communities for retraining and reskilling workers into clean-technology jobs and encouraging investment into areas where workers have been displaced.

### *Dilemmas Facing National Unions*

These four unions have each played a public role in the debate about the environment. They each approach these debates in distinctive ways, deploying their research and policy-developing capacities to both identify the issues confronting unions and to secure a future for their members. As the four unions illustrate, these are difficult questions to resolve between market solutions and state-based ones. Such tensions are played out in the contrast between the first two unions in relation to the ETS scheme and its implications. Equally, the last two unions, in advocating a more comprehensive embrace of renewable industries and an industrial policy resting on a just transition, also address these tensions, although most unions see a state-based set of policies as the way forward.

While the institutional focus on union environmental politics has value, particularly in distinguishing the trajectories that unions promote at a policy level, it is in relation to localities that the politics of job security and a just transition are played out in full. To explore this aspect we consider two further strands of the argument, demonstrating how unions address the specificities of industry, economy and the community (Potier 1986) with the possibility of transcending the institutional preoccupations of unions.

## Local Unions and Australia's Carbon-Exposed Regions

The major challenges for the union movement are in the regions and communities where traditional production sectors will become unsustainable and unviable as carbon constraints become a reality. It is within these local contexts that union leaderships confront nervous and deeply concerned memberships that are looking to their unions for reassurances; here the environmental politics of unions are being tested. The following three regional case studies provide insights into the activities of unions within carbon exposed regions and how local contexts shape union environmental politics. In seeking to build capacity to respond to the changes that affront these regions, regional labor councils are proving to be an important vehicle for advancing union environmental politics.

### *"Green Jobs" and Revitalization: Illawarra, New South Wales*

The Illawarra region begins fifty miles south of Sydney in New South Wales. The region includes the coastal towns of Port Kembla, Wollongong, and Shellharbour as well as inland towns of Moss Vale, Bowral, and Mittagong. Coal mining was the first major industry to be established in the region beginning in the 1870s. By the 1920s steel companies had begun operating in Port Kembla where by the 1940s they had expanded to become the largest steelworks in Australia. However, in the 1980s, like other steel industries throughout the world, the local industry began a period of contraction, shedding hundreds of secure and well-paid union jobs. Between 1981 and the mid-1990s the Port Kembla workforce declined from twenty-one thousand to six thousand employees (Markey and Nixon 2004, 154). Over this period employment in the mining sector also declined as mines reduced their operations or ceased to operate. The decline in steel and mining jobs had dramatic regional impacts with some of NSW's highest unemployment rates regularly recorded in the Illawarra.

The South Coast Labour Council, the local union confederation for the Illawarra, has served as the major collective voice for unions and organized labor on development matters. Throughout its history, the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC) has played a pivotal role in regional development initiatives and the NSW government, for the most part, has welcomed their input. In the 1980s, for example, the SCLC was a member, along with government, business, and farmers, of the Kembla Harbour Taskforce, which played an important role in diversifying the region's port facility beyond

coal and steel to include grain exports (Markey and Nixon 2004). The SCLC also has a history of engaging in environmentally politics through its involvement in Green Ban activities in the 1980s whereby unions prevented building projects perceived to be environmentally and socially insensitive from going ahead (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998). It is against this background that the SCLC's activities in initiating the Illawarra Green Jobs Project is situated.

The Illawarra Green Jobs Project (Donaldson et al. 2009) began in April 2009. By this point, Green Jobs were being spoken about within the leadership of the union movement as way to stimulate job growth (see, for example, ACTU and ACF 2008) and revitalize deindustrialized areas. While increasingly a service and agriculturally based economy, Illawarra's struggling steel and mining sector were expected to confront new difficulties as a consequence of the proposed ETS. The SCLC sought to respond to these challenges with a proposal to capture new green industries. Arthur Rorris, secretary of the SCLC, stated:

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, the same industries—such as heavy manufacturing and steel—that exposed the region to the full impact of the global economic crisis and climate change policy could make us competitive in the development of the green economy and sustainable industry. (Rorris 2009)

In the development of the Greens Jobs Illawarra Project, the SCLC commissioned a multidisciplinary team of researchers at the University of Wollongong to map out an action plan to support sustainable jobs and investment in the region. A Project Steering Committee consisting of the SCLC, the Illawarra Business Chamber, Australian Industry Group, the local shire, and NSW government representatives was established to outline the parameters and provide guidance to the Project. The Project aimed to demonstrate to investors and various levels of government that the Illawarra could lead the nation as a “sustainable region” through:

. . . greener residential and commercial buildings, alternative power generation, manufacturing alternative energy equipment components as well as future training and research pathways. (SCLC 2009, 1)

While job creation in new green-technology industries (e.g., the manufacture of components for wind and wave power industries) are an important feature of the Action Plan, these industries are not well established in Illawarra. Where job growth has more potential is in “greening” existing industries. At the forefront of the Action Plan, for example, is a recommendation for the advancement of the Port Kembla Steelworks Cogeneration Project, which Blue Scope Steel, the owner of the steelworks, had proposed for some time but not implemented. According to the Plan's findings, this project would create two thousand construction jobs (representing the overwhelming majority of jobs to emerge out of the Plan) and would contribute to the abatement of one million tons of greenhouse gases per year. Holding onto jobs that are currently

available in the region seems far more viable and less remote than attracting new “green” industries. It is one of the dilemmas that unions confront when pursuing “transition” policies.

Illawarra workers face an uncertain future. BlueScope Steel has used the uncertainty surrounding the ETS, the global financial crisis, and a lack of government financial support to explain the company’s delay in the \$1 billion cogeneration plant (SCLC 2009). This example highlights the challenges that the region’s unions confront when dealing with powerful corporations that are seemingly technologically able to meet the challenges of a carbon-constrained environment but not committing to do so in the current economic and political climate. Such authority curtails union capacity to have much influence over a company’s environmental impacts and demonstrates the limits of such a position among unions.

The SCLC’s development of the Action Plan is, however, an important first step in responding to the changes that have occurred and are likely to continue to occur in Illawarra. While the NSW government provided financial assistance for the SCLC’s commissioning of the Action Plan, it remains unclear how far the Government will go to support and implement the recommendations to emerge from the Plan. The SCLC also confronts the challenge of remaining a major player in the further development and implementation of the Plan as there is no formal mechanism to ensure this occurs.

### *A Future Beyond Brown Coal? The Latrobe Valley, Victoria*

The Latrobe Valley is located about one hundred miles east of Melbourne in the Australian state of Victoria. With a population around seventy-three thousand, the Latrobe Valley represents one of Australia’s major provincial centers and an industrial heartland for the state of Victoria. The region contains immense seams of lignite or brown coal, which serves as the principle fuel for Victoria’s electricity generation, providing nearly 80 percent of Victoria’s electricity and accounting for over half of the state’s total carbon emissions (Latrobe City Council 2009).

Not surprisingly, the impact of a carbon-constrained environment on the Latrobe Valley has been a source of great concern and commentary by local, state, and federal politicians; regional development agencies; and community and union leaders. Community fears about the region’s future have been escalated by the power generators’ very public campaign against the government’s proposed ETS. The generators have claimed that the ETS will force writedowns in their assets, threaten future investments, and force them to reduce or close their operations (*The Age* 2009a, 4).

The history of trade unionism in the Latrobe Valley begins with the arrival of coal mining and power generation at the turn of the century and is developed throughout the twentieth century. However, in the 1990s, the electricity generators were corporatized and privatized, precipitating economic and industrial decline (Birrell 2001) and overall declining union membership (Pullin and Haidar 2002). Trade unions and the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council (GTLC), the local labor council, however,

continue to maintain a high profile in the local media and are generally respected by Latrobe Valley workers and residents.

Coal-fired generators threatening to close their operations did not elicit expected union responses. Unions labeled these threats as “grabs” for compensation and told the state government to renationalize the coal fields and the power generation and supply industry. They refused to be seen as working for the coal lobby or the multinationals who they blamed for not doing enough to address carbon-emissions (*The Age* 2008). With many of the region’s jobs tied to the coal economy the local union movement, however, cannot afford to be seen as not supporting coal or attracting heavy industry. When the Victorian Government announced plans to begin exporting the region’s coal to India the unions did not express concern about the environmental implications like environmentalists but expressed skepticism about the proposals becoming a reality (*The Age* 2009b).

It is against this backdrop that the regional union movement’s environmental politics has unfolded. The challenge is to convince the membership in the brown coal industry and local and state government representatives that there are sustainable alternatives for what is commonly perceived as a “coal” region. The unions are seeking to pursue a “high road” development strategy that provides not only secure forms of “decent” work but also environmentally responsible investment.

The ETU has worked to establish the Latrobe Valley as a site of renewable technology manufacturing. In the 1990s, the ETU worked with the Siemens Latrobe Valley management in an attempt to promote the manufacture of wind generators in the region. Prototype work was done and a number of units were produced demonstrating the feasibility of creating alternative “green” industry and employment opportunities for workers in the region. However, despite this union involvement and supportive action by Earthworker, an activist campaigning group in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the proposal eventually came to nothing when Siemens pulled out because of a lack of state government support (Burgmann McNaughton, and Penney 2002). In 2009, the Mining and Energy Division of the CFMEU has sought to establish a cooperative in the Latrobe Valley to manufacture and install solar hot-water systems. The union, however, struggled to secure membership support for the initiative and internal divisions contributed to the union leadership’s decision in 2010 to request the support of the GTLC to keep the project going. As a confederation the GTLC has been able to transcend some of the resistance and barriers that confronted the leadership of the miners union and (at the time of writing) is in the midst of formally establishing the cooperative and securing government support and funding for the project.

The advancement of union environmental politics in the Latrobe Valley has also been highlighted by the GTLC’s work to develop a “transition” plan for the region. Their support for “green transition” initiatives has attracted the attention of environmental organizations, like Environmental Victoria, the largest environmental organization in the state, as well as start-up companies in the renewable and clean technology sector who are seeking support for their enterprises. The GTLC has begun looking to the possibility of a future beyond coal, listening to a range of environmental

organizations putting forward “zero emissions” energy proposals. The Gippsland Greenhouse Alliance, a formally constituted body consisting of representatives from local business, government, unions, environmental, and community organizations, serves as the forum for much of these discussions.

The GTLC takes a position that the change that is required for achieving sustainability and just transition for the region is likely to be led by local community organizations. They see their role as one of the local community organizations that are building sustainable alternatives for the region. The GTLC and its affiliated unions have already been working to educate and train its members in environmental matters including energy policy. It is now taking steps to develop new proposals and partnerships to help realize a “just transition” where sustainable development initiatives also consider the social and labor-related dimensions of concern to workers and the local community (Parker 2009/2010). Given the limited financial resources available to the GTLC, much of this work depends upon volunteers and government support. It remains to be seen if the Victorian government is prepared to support and engage with the GTLC on these initiatives in the same ways as the NSW government engaged with the SCLC.

### *Coal for Sale: The Hunter Valley, New South Wales*

Decoupling the Australian economy from coal is a monumental task which few governments are prepared to seriously consider. From a coal industry and coal jobs perspective there are reasons to be positive about the future of coal in a so-called “carbon-constrained world.” The global demand for coal, oil, and gas has never been greater. China, India, and other emerging economies are importing and burning fossil fuels at a phenomenal rate. According to some reports, China alone adds new coal plants equivalent to the UK’s entire electricity-generating capacity each year (ABC 2008a). Australia’s export coal industry has benefited significantly from these developments.

Australia is the world’s largest exporter of coal and coal serves as the country’s most lucrative export commodity, representing 30 percent of Australia’s global trade (McNeal 2009). Much of this coal is mined in the Hunter Valley NSW and exported out of Newcastle a town located about eighty miles north of Sydney. It is here that the coal debate and union commitment to decarbonizing the environment and transitioning local economies become much more difficult.

The Hunter Valley, like the Illawarra, was historically a steel and coal region. Similarly, Newcastle suffered major setbacks when the steelworks owned by BHP closed their operations in 1999, eliminating 2,500 jobs and an estimated two thousand jobs in support industries (Marciniak 2000). Currently, however, the Hunter Valley and Newcastle are in the midst of an economic revival on the back of rising coal exports. While the coal industry has had its ups and downs over the past few years, high coal prices have stimulated the development and expansion of existing coal operations in the Hunter Valley (DPI 2009).

The NSW government has recently lodged plans for three new baseload electricity generation plants, one of which is proposed for Newcastle. The proposal is for the new generators to operate on either coal or gas but it is generally expected that coal is the likely and lucrative option. The NSW Green Party and environmental organizations have already begun a well-organized campaign aimed at preventing the construction of these power plants. According to NSW Green MP John Kaye, these new coal-fired power plants would produce some 30 million tons of carbon dioxide each year and would contribute to an 18 percent increase in the state's emissions (Kaye 2009).

The CFMEU Mining and Energy Division in NSW has been a strong supporter of the construction of new coal-fired power stations and the expansion of coal mining in NSW. In 2007, there were 13 392 people directly employed in the five coalfield regions across NSW; the highest level of employment in the industry since 1997 (DPI 2009). Given the level of division that is growing in Australia and internationally over the use of coal, the CFMEU's position on current and future proposals related to coal will be tested as will be their self-proclaimed commitment to addressing climate change. The environmental politics of the CFMEU Mining and Energy division in NSW is best described as "progressive productionist" (Beynon, Cox, and Hudson 2000, 249) maintaining that Newcastle and NSW needs coal, the world needs coal, and NSW has an abundant supply.

These positions are coming into conflict with a marginal but growing number of voices in Newcastle who are proposing alternative futures for the region. Greenpeace Australia, for example, estimates that a "shift to a renewable energy economy would create between 7,500 and 14,300 new jobs—a net gain of between 3,900 and 10,700 jobs" (Bill et al., 2008, 5). These figures mirror other reports (ACTU and ACF 2008) and views expressed by unions like the ETU (2009). For many workers, the notion that renewable industries and investors are going to relocate to the Hunter and Newcastle region seems too remote to consider seriously, particularly when coal is once again delivering jobs to the region. The vibrancy of the current economic context and an organized labor movement that benefited from coal employment after years of high unemployment makes principled stances against coal increasingly difficult.

## Discussion

Many Australian unions are adopting a new environmental politics—changing circumstances have forced them to do so. It is neither a uniform nor consistent political agenda within the union movement; it is unlikely to ever become one. The environmental politics of Australian unions can only be understood by understanding the ways vested interests of unions and the industries in which each union represents members and the local contexts and local challenges they confront. Job defense lies at the foundation of union politics. Where job defense comes in contact with industries that are seen as damaging and threatening to the environment is where union's commitment to the environment is truly tested.



As the future of coal and coal-based industries become the focus of government policies unions in these industries will be confronted with difficult political decisions. This point is made clear by Tony Maher of the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division:

A coalminer or a power station worker isn't going to leave their job on \$120,000-plus with well-regulated shift arrangements and decent conditions to install low-wattage light bulbs or insulation. (*The Australian* 2009)

While many would like to embrace "green" jobs and environmentally sustainable alternatives, these options may not be able to deliver the sorts of jobs and conditions that unions have sought to secure for their members.

At the national level, unions, as social and political institutions, have the potential to become polarized over climate change politics, undermining their strength and credibility as environmental actors. One of the major issues at the moment where divisions can be identified is over the level of support that should be provided to coal interests as opposed to those in the renewable sector. Unions like the ETU, whose members work across many sectors may find themselves increasingly at odds with unions like the CFMEU and AWU, whose membership will experience the impacts of moves toward a carbon-constrained economy. When unions are entrenched in the "old economy" it makes it much harder for them to advocate "decarbonizing" industries.

While there are differences between the unions, as national institutions, it is in the localities that both the focus of union policy is worked out in practice and the possibilities of transcending institutional division and difference will occur. It is possible that new forms of solidarity can be built around labor councils and the like as has occurred in the United States (Dean and Reynolds 2009). Of note, unions located in old industrial regions appear to be increasingly attracted to the possibility of renewable energy and sustainable manufacturing as a way to revitalize these economies. The examples of the Illawarra and the Latrobe Valley illustrate how a new environmental politics may be reviving union confederations in these localities with a new sense of purpose.

While environmental politics among unions is becoming more nuanced, their authority and influence in shaping climate politics in Australia or even at the regional level is not significant. Governments set the boundaries within which unions operate (Newell 2000) and it is governments that have the capacity to deliver the vast economic, industrial, and regional changes that are required to reduce carbon emissions. Unions do have the capacity to strengthen or weaken a government's environmental agenda. They also have the potential to challenge, and promote an alternative course of action, one that tends to question government environmental positions.

To date, the Australian union movement has proven to be an important ally for the government in its attempts to pass comprehensive policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions. Nonetheless, this is an institutional response, and it remains possible that a different politics could eventually play out in the carbon-constrained communities, for and against a just transition. It also remains difficult to comprehend the scale and the

rapidity with which industrial and regional change is going to occur. It is equally unclear if coal and heavy industry concerns are ‘real’ or part of the lobbying process to defend the status quo. This dilemma is compounded by the fact that most unions in Australia are not particularly good at researching and understanding the organizations they deal with and how best to respond to company statements.

There is a general feeling among union leaderships that the government will assist workers and their communities if there are company closures as a consequence of climate-change policies. Governments at all levels are acutely aware that some carbon-exposed regions are going to confront significant adjustment problems (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). The unions in the Illawarra and the Latrobe Valley are providing some assistance to these governments in the form of “transition” proposals. As Arthur Morris, secretary of SCLC, states:

Whether they [green jobs initiatives] happen or not will depend on . . . whether our governments are prepared to put their faith in our community and the necessary resources into our regional economy to allow the plan to succeed. (Morris 2009)

Whether governments genuinely believe in these proposals or view unions as partners in the adjustment process remains to be seen.

Unlike the United States where state, city, and regionally based labor councils have remained active and effective in shaping local development outcomes (see Whalen 2007; Dean and Reynolds 2009), in Australia regional labor councils have struggled to find a role in the political system (Daly 2000). Nonetheless, some of these largely moribund councils are now becoming a significant voice for local workers and the communities they serve, and are receiving the attention and recognition from government ministers and departments in charge of regional development, skills, and training and environmental sustainability matters. It is within the regional councils of coal and steel communities that environmental politics among unions appears to be most vibrant. It is here that unions are mapping out alternatives and seeking to develop strategies to address environmental matters within the context of climate-change politics, while pursuing and representing members on industrial matters. Thus for unions, the challenge is to balance working with governments and building alternative bases of mobilization. While unions will not make the decisions about the future of these communities in the final instance, they can play an influential role in the process.

## Conclusion

As unions seek to advance a new environmental politics they face difficult decisions. The carbon-constraints that are being put in place within Australia and elsewhere will have a dramatic impact upon the nature of work and type of industries found in Australia in the years to come. Unions, as national institutions, for the most part, are building upon what they have always done as collective organizations. They seek to influence the direction of enterprises and public policies as well as policy-making processes

so they better serve the interests of working people. Such unions are working as environmental actors and as industrial actors. The outcome is a union movement that seeks to influence policy, but within the political parameters of the prevailing political economy. Hence, unions representing workers in similar situations and industries can come to adopt different positions and stances in relation to climate change.

It is in localities and the communities that this politics will be played out. A balance is being drawn between job protection as such and preparing for an uncertain future. These challenges are strongest in those communities where carbon-emissions industries are based. These communities are typically some distance from the offices of national union officials. It is in these communities that the major battles over jobs and the environment will take place. Local unions and their councils are playing a revitalized role as both environmental and economic development actor in the pursuit of sustainable and just options for communities in transition. Convincing local union members and political leaders that “dirty regions” can become a base of a new “green economy” will be no easy task, but for unions in these communities it has become a more palatable, desirable, and, in some cases, more popular option. Forging an environmental politics that is embraced by governments, accepted by members, and provides meaningful and viable alternatives and strategies for curbing Australia’s carbon diet is the task facing these locally based unions.

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