



SECURING OUR CHILDREN'S WORLD

Our Union and the Environment

“SECURING OUR CHILDREN’S WORLD, Our Union and the Environment” is an updated report developed by the USW’s International Executive Board Environmental Task Force which was presented to the IEB on February 28, 2006 in Pittsburgh, PA. As its title suggests, the report builds upon the landmark work of the original report, OUR CHILDREN’S WORLD, which was adopted at the 25th Constitutional Convention of the USW in Toronto, Ontario on August 30, 1990.

In 1990, when the USW adopted its first comprehensive environmental policy statement, our world, its economic systems, and our union were all dramatically different. In the intervening years, globalization and the World Trade Organization displaced the system of national economies. The Berlin Wall crumbled, drawing Eastern Europe, Russia, and China into the international economy and greatly affected both the conditions of labor and the regulation of the environment. And our union participated in four major mergers — with the URW, ABG, IWA and PACE — as well as several smaller ones.

The USW is today North America's largest manufacturing union and the dominant representative of workers in the steel, aluminum, paper and forest products, metal mining, oil, chemical, rubber,

tire, plastics, glass and countless other industries. The breadth of our engagement with the global economy is greater than any other labor organization in the world. The overwhelming majority of our members work today for large multinational corporations who compete globally, with little regard or loyalty to their countries of origin. As such, the USW recognizes the special obligation it has to speak out to union members not only in North America, but across the planet, on the fundamental issues of wealth, poverty, and the creation of sustainable economies in our ever shrinking planet.

In 1990 we devoted much of our

attention to exposing the false choice between good jobs and environmental protections in North America. Today, we are expanding our attention to the pivotal issue of how we exercise control over a global economy that threatens the very framework of the regulatory systems that have provided us with labor law, environmental protections, human rights and, indeed, basic democratic processes in our two countries. In 2006, we are intent on exposing the false choice between good jobs in a

global economy and the full range of civil society protections that were achieved in the twentieth century.

In our original report, we wrote:

"In the old days, we thought that smoke meant jobs. That pollution was a byproduct of prosperity. And that if the air smelled funny, and the mill killed all the fish in the river, such was the price of progress. Besides, you could always get away on the weekend to a place where the air was pure, the lake was clean and the fishing was good.

Today we know better. "Smoke" has become "air pollution," with a host of noxious ingredients like sulfur dioxide, which corrodes our lungs, and benzene, which menaces our children with leukemia. Millions of tons of toxic chemicals get dumped into our water every day, from heavy metals to organic solvents. They threaten not only fish, but every person downstream.

Decades ago, nobody worried much about hazardous waste. Today we are spending billions of dollars in what can only be a partial clean-up of thousands of sites that threaten public health. Entire communities, such as Times Beach in Missouri, have been abandoned because of contamination by hazardous waste.

Pollution issues used to be local. The smoke from a factory affected the town, but not the world beyond — no longer. Acid rain, generated by pollutants from power plants, factories and automobiles, threatens forests and lakes half way across the continent and may contribute to thousands of deaths every year. Nor do the problems stop at national borders — some are truly global. Chlorofluorocarbons like Freon are slowly destroying the protective layer of ozone in the Earth's upper atmosphere. The ozone layer shields us from harmful ultraviolet radiation; if it is lost, the result will be serious damage to human and animal life and to crops.

The burning of fossil fuels like petroleum and coal generates billions of tons of carbon dioxide every year. This gas and others trap heat in the atmosphere. Studies show the resulting global warming will melt the ice caps, flood our coastal cities and turn huge agricultural areas into deserts. The problem is made worse by the widespread destruction of our forests, which help absorb excess carbon dioxide.

[Poor forest and other habitat management] threatens many species of plants and animals with extinction. Even our oceans are at risk from toxic runoff, oil spills and waste dumping at sea.

Added together, these problems may threaten the ultimate capability of our resources to sustain civilization.

Can the destruction of our environment be stopped? If so, who will pay the price? Some would have us believe that these problems are



not as serious as we think, or that they can be left for the next generation to solve. Others maintain that pollution is still the price of progress, and that attempting to end it would cause massive economic dislocation, putting millions out of work.

The argument can get personal. Some companies, faced with new regulations, have threatened to shut down — pitting workers against environmentalists. Additional controls would be just too expensive, these companies say, and workers who want to save their jobs had better line up behind their employers.

This is part of a familiar corporate strategy. When the union tried to clean up unsafe conditions in plants or reduce toxic chemical exposures, some companies would threaten us with loss of jobs. Our response has always been that a failure to act will cost us our members' lives. Time and again, these unscrupulous employers have backed down, proving that we must fight for good jobs and a clean environment as mutually reinforcing goals.

Are they right? Do we really have to choose between our jobs and the environment? Is our economy threatened by efforts to stop environmental damage? Or is a damaged environment the real threat to our economic well-being? Can we afford to wait? What kind of world do we want to leave our children?

We believe the greatest threat to our children's future may lie in the destruction of their environment. For that reason alone, environment must be an issue for our union. In addition, we cannot protect Steelworker jobs by ignoring environmental problems. This report summarizes our findings and recommendations, beginning with a basic review of the threat to our environment."

In July, 2005 the International Executive Board reconstituted its Environmental Policy Committee and charged it with reviewing and restating our commitment to the environment. Our committee believes that the words of our original report still ring true today.

But in 2006 much of the doubt that was expressed in 1990 has been removed. In the wake of the most devastating hurricane season in modern times, the destructive danger of doing nothing about global warming looms over the U.S. and world economies. Over 12,000 USW members and retirees were personally affected by the 2005 hurricanes, losing their jobs, homes, and in some cases, their lives. The economic impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita may run as high as

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\$200 billion, an amount that our economies can ill afford to absorb on a regular and escalating basis.

Our original report identified global warming as the single most important environmental issue of our lifetime and warned about the risks of doing nothing. During the last 15 years the U.S. government, in particular, has failed to take meaningful steps and today, global warming has emerged as a significant threat to the stability of steelworker jobs and communities in the coming years. We can no longer be content with simply identifying problems and issuing warnings. A strategic response to environmental challenges like global warming is key to our union's long-term survival. The good jobs of the future will be based on principles of environmental sustainability. Quite simply, this means that the jobs and other human activities that we engage in must be performed in a manner that doesn't destroy the planet we inhabit. Two hundred years ago, we didn't concern ourselves with this issue. Even a hundred years ago, such concerns were minimized. Today, scientists are very clear that escalating human impairment of our environment will rapidly and irretrievably change the ability of human beings to survive on the planet. Thus, we can say with certainty that those jobs that are based on the continued rapid consumption of the earth's resources and atmosphere simply will not last.

Our report will examine each of the areas originally noted in our 1990 report and touch on both the progress made and the threats that are still outstanding. In the concluding section we outline an action plan for our union's broad engagement with the global environmental movement. In many ways, there is no more important policy decision for us to make — a planet populated by 6.5 billion human beings, virtually all of whom share our own aspirations for a better life, cannot imagine a future of peace and growing prosperity without also imagining a global economy that lifts 2 billion people out of poverty in a sustainable fashion. The alternative — an unregulated global economy that increases the gap between rich and poor and ignores sound environmental science — will ultimately destroy the good jobs and healthy environment that are the legacy of the North American trade union movement.