

## Blue Collar Workers and a Sustainable Economy:

We who work and have worked with our hands, bodies and minds to build, manufacture and repair are committed to our own well-being and that of our families. Our unions have often fought successfully toward this goal, delivering on wages and pensions.

*It's time to face another commitment we owe our families and the next generation: to work for a healthy planet and for justice.*

**The Climate Crisis is now.** We know about the melting glaciers, rising sea levels, droughts, floods, heat waves, fires and hurricanes. Youth, including our own children and grandchildren, are ready to fight for a livable planet, and many are already doing so. *Our unions must stand with them.*

As blue-collar workers, we could use our potentially enormous collective power not only for union jobs, but also for doing work that serves the *common good*. While nurses' and teachers' unions increasingly bargain for the common good (nurses including the interests of patients, and teachers including the interests of students and parents), we and our unions are not accustomed to this. Building trades unions such as mine, though they fight for union labor and conditions, are used to simply accepting what the powerful and wealthy choose to build. ("Jobs are jobs.")

It's worse when our unions ally with those who have mostly created our crises. Why have the California State Building Trades allied with the Western States Petroleum Association to promote the interests of the oil companies, which are using their clout to resist curbing Greenhouse Gases (GHGs)? It is one thing for union workers to perform fossil-fuel work; it is quite another thing for unions to promote the agenda of fossil fuel companies. Many, many blue-collar workers do not agree with this.

It hurts our own self-interest too; in Oakland where I live, the non-union presence on high-rise construction sites is increasing. To fight this, we need allies. If Building Trades unions are allied with Big Oil, why should community groups and other unions back us? Can Building Trades unions, even the strongest among us, really be

successful in maintaining good labor standards by ourselves? *Who are our real allies?*

Below are two very different examples of when building unions have allied with other groups.

Workers from building trades and refinery unions mobilized in support of fossil fuel interests

against the health needs of the residents of the largely working class city of Richmond, CA. They opposed a health ordinance to end coal storage and shipping in Richmond at a Planning Committee meeting in July 2019 and at City Council meetings in December 2019 and January 2020 (when the ordinance passed). The flier addressing the union workers didn't mention health – it only said that blue collar jobs were under attack.

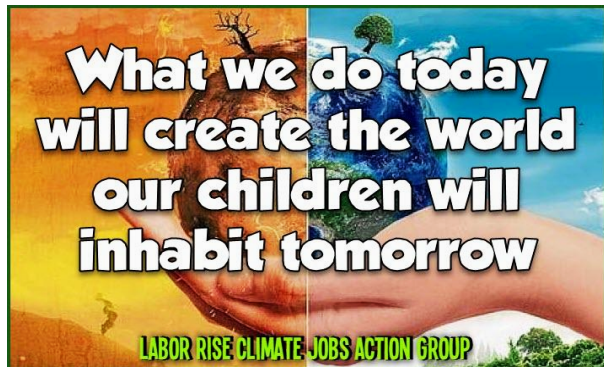
Blue collar workers and our families are among those who suffer if we live where polluting industries are economically and politically powerful. In Richmond, 15,000 residents sought medical care after a fire at Chevron in August 2012. My sisters-in-law, union teachers, have each lived and taught in Richmond for 30-40 years, and had many, many students with asthma. My nephew had breathing problems while growing up in Richmond.

50 years ago, construction laborers in Sydney, Australia's largest city, in alliance with community groups, carried out dozens of Green Bans – strikes that successfully stopped unchecked construction that would have destroyed parks, working class communities and buildings of architectural significance.

They are credited with saving Sydney. Their strong union also won big wage increases, and huge improvements in working conditions and safety.



We and our unions must be part of a broad, diverse alliance and have a strong voice within it. The centrality of work issues in our lives and the periods of unemployment that we as building trades workers have experienced may not be understood by some in the climate movement. We can educate others about these issues, even as we have much to learn from those who have long been working on climate justice issues. *We need to be on the right side of history—helping to shape the future, rather than resisting it.*



In my union, workers have already benefited from Proposition 39, which has funded energy-efficient retrofitting in schools and, from CA Title 24, commercial projects requiring energy efficient standards. Union electricians stand to gain as electrification generated by renewables gets a huge boost.

The transition to a sustainable economy is more challenging for workers in some unions. Our huge struggle requires fighting for the interests of ALL workers and working people. That includes workers displaced by the transition to a sustainable economy; it includes workers, especially workers of color, who have had limited access to good union jobs; it includes workers in the Global South. It includes making sure that new green jobs are high road union jobs. It includes fighting for workers to get paid for retraining, or for early retirement.

Many unions, including mine, pride themselves on their training programs. In 1983, I was among 50 members of my union (out of 700 members total then in San Francisco) who for a year went to a weekly three-hour class to learn energy-efficient retrofitting of buildings. We hoped for union work where we could make both a good living

and a social contribution. Then the Reagan administration sabotaged energy conservation and efficiency (removing the solar panels from the White House was a telling symbol) and the promise of those jobs disappeared. (Reagan attacked workers up one side and down the other, starting with the air traffic controllers; oversaw huge exporting of jobs and the gutting of factory towns; enriched the 1% and aggravated inequality that has reached obscene levels today).

The type of training we got in 1983 is still needed. Our training occurred in the evening after we were tired from work. Can society afford to pay workers for daytime retraining? Yes, if the resources of this wealthy society are redirected. Our labor creates the wealth of billionaires. Some CEOs get 600 times the median income of the workers. Exxon made \$19.7 billion profit in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2022. A trillion dollars a year of our tax money goes to the military whose activities (e.g., Wars for Oil) make possible corporate plundering of resources from other countries. Greed is killing the planet.

*The strongest possible alliance of workers, youth, climate and environmental justice activists, people of all races, ethnicities, women and men, is required for the huge changes needed. Working together while respecting our differences is some of the work we must do. On a construction site, each worker needs to hold up their end. It's time, in the Climate Crisis, for blue collar workers and our unions to hold up our end.*

[Steve Morse ([steve\\_morse@mac.com](mailto:steve_morse@mac.com)) is a retired member of Sheet Metal Workers Local 104 and a member of Labor Rise Climate Jobs Action Group. To learn about our upcoming webinar on labor & climate, find our contact info here: <https://bit.ly/LaborRiseClimateJobs> , or use this QR code.



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