

ment” explored the dynamic but ultimately problematic attempt by immigrants to apply Italian organizing strategies and tactics to American labor struggles. During the Lawrence strike of 1912, the “children’s exodus”—a practice long in use in labor disputes in Italy—dramatically demonstrated the potential of importing and adapting organizing techniques from abroad. However, Italian syndicalism failed to have a significant impact on American labor organizing in the long run. Topp explored the positive aspects of the interaction between the two labor movements, but his paper suggested that incorporating the language, symbols, and tactics of the old country can also backfire.

Workers and the Environment: Pacific Northwest Labor History Association

Nils Sonntag
University of Cincinnati

The 1995 conference of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association (held at the University of Oregon, May 19–21) took as its theme the relationship between workers and the environment. Panels addressed a variety of issues on this subject, including the history of labor-environment relations in British Columbia, labor’s environmental organizing strategies, and case studies investigating the complex connections between work and environment.

Keynote speaker John Foster, of the University of Oregon, examined the historical relationship between class and the environment. He analyzed how class issues were connected to or separated from ecological concerns in order to serve perceived class interests. Of special value was his discussion of the conflict between labor and environmentalism in the 1970s and 1980s, which he traced back to underlying struggles between the working and middle classes. Another keynote speaker, William Robbins of Oregon State University, examined the changing relationship between humans and nature under what he calls the “dominant culture of capitalism.” He discussed how this culture has changed the landscape and ecology since the beginnings of industrialization in the western United States.

One panel provided exemplary investigations of labor-environmental relations in British Columbia. Lesley Cooper described workers’ strategies for reacting to unemployment during the gold rush of the 1930s, while Mark Leier discussed how Vancouver’s early labor movement opposed the creation of parks. Thomas Baker examined how the competition for em-

ployment in the lumber industry has influenced workers' attitudes toward the forest environment and environmentalists in British Columbia and Washington State.

Another panel combined perspectives of academics and union members on how environmental concerns influence labor organizing strategies. Norm Diamond of the Canadian Auto Workers spoke on the historical dilemmas facing labor environmentalism; Christine Micklewright, also of the Canadian Auto Workers, presented strategies to actually create a discussion within unions, but also in society as a whole, on "eco-unionism." She especially emphasized the importance of gender issues in this undertaking. Flaxen Conway, Charles Spencer, and Bob Warren analyzed calls for changes in the contemporary forest industry from labor and environmental perspectives. They stressed the importance of abandoning current practices in the industry which endanger both the environment and jobs and, ultimately, the industry itself. Finally, David Mazza investigated the strategies of the conservative Wise Use movement in Oregon, which sees the solution to the problems of the modern lumber industry as being the complete withdrawal of federal "interference" from environmental matters.

The issues of sustainability raised by this panel were probed further in presentations by Stan Beyer, who examined the impact of large-scale lumbering on communities, and by Blaine Vogt, who looked at the relation of "work, ecology, and sustainability" in the fishing economies of the Columbia River basin. Both argued that if strategies of sustainability are not adopted, lumber and fishing industries will ultimately ruin themselves, along with the communities and economies depending on them. A final case study by Janet May Nicol asked how class and ethnicity intersect in a work environment.

The conference raised a considerable number of questions about the relationship between workers and the environment. However, it also demonstrated the need and opportunity for further study of these issues, including important race and gender dimensions, as well as more work on the history of the relationship in regional economies and individual cases. These deficiencies are, of course, understandable, considering that environmental history is relatively new, and its connections with labor issues are only now emerging.