

Green Steal: Should EF! Work with the Steel Union?

May 1999

Contents

Bad Idea 3
Good Idea 4

Bad Idea

by John Zerzan

In recent months some Earth Firsters have assisted the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) in their strike against the Maxxam corporation. Maxxam and its boss, Charles Hurwitz, have been the enemy in the EF! attempt to save redwoods in the Northern California Headwaters campaign.

Now there is growing talk of an anti-Maxxam, pro-environment alliance between EF! and the steelworkers union. A USWA organizer proposed such a partnership in March at the Environmental Law Conference in Eugene, Oregon, to enthusiastic applause.

I think such a development would be a serious step backward, not a way forward for the radical environmental movement, consider the following aspects:

- Industrialism

Industrial civilization is a disaster for the natural world. The health of the United Steelworkers of America is more steelworkers, more steel mills. Kind of obvious.

- Unionism

The USWA is out to “topple Maxxam!” Baloney. It has never toppled anything and never will. As most workers (and even most leftists) realize, unions are police agents, in place largely to control workers. Each union local is the property of an international union, and dissident activity goes nowhere for that reason. If a local starts to get out of line, the international puts it into receivership, i.e. takes it over. Meanwhile, the USWA gets free pickets and other EF! support. What does the environment get?

- Reformism

Unions are pillars of industrial society. Any strategy that depends on and strengthens unions further cements the dominant, oppressive order. An “environmental” policy that issues from an EF!/USWA partnership would be very tame and limited, more likely on the order of current Environmental Protection Agency orientation, and would tend to limit radical efforts.

- Absence of Autonomy

Ties to bureaucratic organized labor constitute a much more mediated, officialized direction than EF! has previously stood for. How about directly communicating with workers rather than agreements with their union agents? It would be harder, but going against the grain always is.

So very unsurprising that the main push to link up with the United Steelworkers of America comes from Northern California, that hotbed of model citizen “activism.”

The tame, reformist outlook of these folks counsels others to get behind this projected development, to be “practical.” I think abolishing the whole devouring, ruinous system is the “practical” thing to do! Let’s go forward with what needs to be done, not backward into the embrace of what has so obviously failed nature and added to the domestication of humans.

Good Idea

by Mikal Jakubal

The *Journal* staff asked me to reply to John Zerzan’s comments since I have been involved in the enviro/labor effort with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) since the beginning. While it will be clear that I differ with John on most of his points, I nevertheless find it useful that someone has begun this discussion. I’m less concerned here with proving a point than with offering perspective. My views are based on my own experience and observations, and I encourage continued critical discussion.

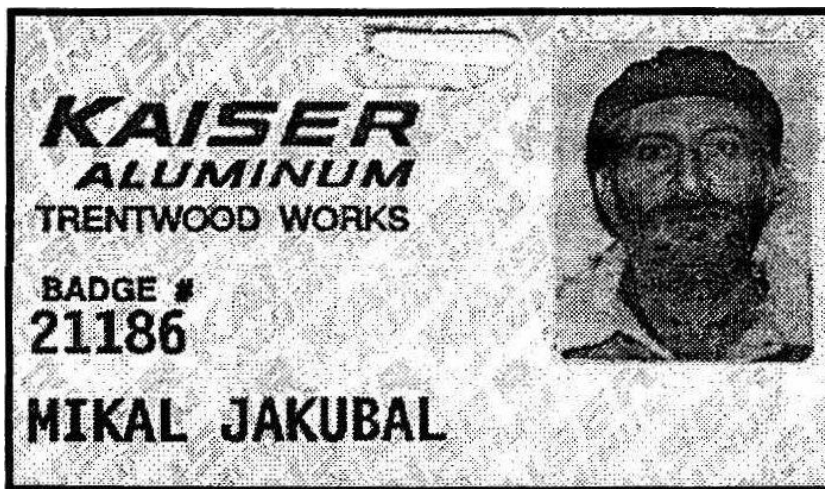
Last October, forest activists from Humboldt County, CA, contacted the USWA (who also work in aluminum), and went to the struck Kaiser Aluminum (a Maxxam subsidiary) plants. Connections made on these trips sparked several actions, including the dramatic Kaiser ore-ship blockade at the Port of Tacoma (see *EF!J* Feb-March 1999) and an anti-Maxxam rally in Scotia, C A with 150 steelworkers. There have been ongoing joint enviro/labor actions around the country since then, and the movement is rapidly growing.

As for John’s comments, there is no, “Earth First!/USWA alliance;” it is better understood as a labor/environmental collaboration. And such collaboration is not merely “proposed”—it has been alive and kicking since October. This has helped open communication between enviros and working-class people in other industries. One point that most of us have emphasized from the beginning is that steelworkers don’t have to become environmentalists, and we don’t have to become unionists.

Point 1. The USWA does not build smelters, they just advocate for those who work them. If the USWA ever holds a “Build More Smelters Now!” rally, you won’t find me or many *EF!*ers there. I am not personally as concerned with the “health of the USWA” as with the health of the individual human beings whom I’ve met and the concerns they have. Guess what? Most of us want the same things: Home, family, meaningful livelihood, community, health— basic stuff. Both John and I have economic situations that allow us freedom and spare time to be activists. You won’t get very far telling someone with a family and house payments that industrialism is a disaster so they should just quit and make their living publishing radical books for the anarcho-primitivist micro-ghetto.

Point 2. It has been argued that the reason that many industrialists invited unions in to organize their plants was to guarantee employee discipline and prevent things like anarcho-syndicalism and wildcat strikes. So? This is not about “unions,” but about

people and opening lines of communication and action between us. Enviros don't have to become cheerleaders for unionism anymore than the other way around. Anyone wondering about how workers feel about the union should go ask them personally.



Deep-cover Earth Agent, Jakubal scabbed for days inside aluminum plants, sowing seeds he hopes will help environmentalists and workers overthrow Maxxam.

Our joint actions have been fun, educational and beneficial for both sides. And there have been as many “proenvironment” actions as “pro-strike” ones. Being realistic, these actions have mostly served to boost mutual morale and provide opportunities to open discussion about more strategically significant future collaboration.

Point 3. Most EF! activism is already basically reformist, aimed more at a change in corporate or government policy than revolution per se. Either way, our strategy does not depend on unions any more than it depends on the Sierra Club. It does depend on broadening our radical outreach, education and communication efforts to the broadest possible audience. What we seek is direct, unmediated communication with individual human beings about matters of mutual concern. We’ve been able to do this with the steelworkers. In the case of Pacific Lumber employees, unionization would finally allow this communication to take place by removing the fear of being unemployed and homeless simply for talking with their neighbors.

No radical efforts will be limited by broadening the movement. Individual EF!ers and autonomous EF! groups can always choose their priorities for themselves. The steelworkers would never let EF! dictate how to run the Kaiser strike so why would anyone think that EF!ers would let the USWA officials direct the forest campaigns? Both sides should proceed with openness and a friendly skepticism.

Point 4. We should go to union halls, hang out at picket lines, go to bars with them, party together. That, in fact, is exactly what we’ve been doing.

The reason that the “main push to link up with the United Steelworkers comes from Northern California” is that both of us are fighting a common enemy—Maxxam—and this gave us a simple and logical point around which to begin communication [Ed. note: A great deal of steelworker outreach is also being organized in Washington state]. Nearly all activist groups have “outreach to the labor movement” on their agendas but don’t know how to go about it. We finally opened the door.

I know that John has had some (apparently bad) experiences with unions in the past. Perhaps he and others could share their insights with newer activists. That would go further than blanket dismissals and absolutist statements. If nothing more comes out of this whole eco/labor effort than a little more human communication and some new perspectives, it will have been worth it.

For more information, contact Rob Lalicker of the USWA Local 7945 in Tacoma, WA at (253) 272-4748; www.uswa.org.

The Ted K Archive

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Earth First! Journal Beltane, May-June 1999, Pages 4.
<archive.org/details/earth_first_1999>

www.thetedkarchive.com