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Job Blackmail [Review of the book *Fear at Work: Job Blackmail, Labor, and the Environment*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] Ever since the establishment of environmental and workplace protections in the early 1970s, private employers have resisted further curbs on corporate conduct by threatening job destruction. The refrain has been that occupational health and safety standards wipe out existing jobs and make new ones impossible. In *Fear at Work*, Richard Kazis and Richard L. Grossman detail the use of this job blackmail to split trade unionists from environmentalists, making unnatural enemies of those who should be allies.

Keywords

labor movement, union, worker rights, unionization, environmentalism, workplace safety

Disciplines

Environmental Studies | Unions

Comments

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Job Blackmail

**FEAR AT WORK:
JOB BLACKMAIL, LABOR,
AND THE ENVIRONMENT**
by Richard Kazis and
Richard L. Grossman

The Pilgrim Press. 302 pp. \$10.95.

Ever since the establishment of environmental and workplace protections in the early 1970s, private employers have resisted further curbs on corporate conduct by threatening job destruction. The refrain has been that occupational health and safety standards wipe out existing jobs and make new ones impossible. In *Fear at Work*, Richard Kazis and

Richard L. Grossman detail the use of this job blackmail to split trade unionists from environmentalists, making unnatural enemies of those who should be allies.

Environmental activists who have developed close ties to organized labor, Kazis and Grossman are frank in addressing environmentalists' failings to face up to the jobs issue and their hesitancy to support labor struggles in coalition efforts. They are equally hard on unionists who see environmental partisans as quiche-and-chablis no-growthers who don't care about workers and jobs.

In two chapters, "The Struggle for Workplace Rights" and "The Fight for Environmental Protection," the authors provide a neat antidote to each movement's prejudices toward the other. Their brief history of the labor movement is sympathetic and accurate. For a trade unionist, the history of environmental struggles is a revelation. John Muir and the fight for Yosemite National Park, the losing battle to stop the Hetch Hetchy Dam, Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*, Earth Day, Love Canal, the Valley of the Drums: the environmental movement has had drama—and deaths—to equal labor's Haymarket and Homestead, Coeur d'Alene and Cripple Creek, Debs and the Pullman strike, Foster and the steel strike, John L. Lewis and the CIO.

Fear at Work goes beyond the standard liberal arguments for environmental and workplace protection, but not before making the liberal case. In industry's view, environmental and occupational health regulations impede growth, reduce productivity, fuel inflation, retard innovation, and, in the end, fail the all-important cost-benefit test. Taking each in turn, Kazis and Grossman muster the facts to debunk these claims. On the key question of job loss, they show that there has been a substantial *net gain* in jobs

thanks to environmental and workplace protection. New industries have sprung up, employing thousands of workers to turn out the research, technologies, equipment, and service to bring about compliance with state and Federal law, while corporate claims of job losses have been absurdly exaggerated.

The book takes a few technical turns—the Wiedenbaum Multiplier versus the Tabb Multiplier in estimating regulatory costs, for example—but *Fear at Work* moves smoothly through the arguments toward the underlying problem of corporate hegemony in our economic and political life. Kazis and Grossman take up issues of class, of control over production in the workplace, of control over investment and other economic decisions in society at large. They lay out a strategy for a united movement for jobs *and* the environment *and* a democratic economy, rather than company-imposed dilemmas that pit workers against environmentalists.

Kazis and Grossman point to some already thriving examples of labor-environmental solidarity. The AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department and several international unions, along with the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society, and other environmental groups, have formed an "OSHA-Environmental Network" for grass-roots political action. The Urban Environment Conference, a Washington-based public interest group founded by the late Senator Philip A. Hart, has brought together trade union, environmental, and minority activists in projects for more than a decade. As for work in the field, the authors describe the successes of Steelworkers Local 1010 and local environmental groups near the Inland Steel plant in East Chicago, Indiana, and recent environmentalist support for striking Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union members at a Portsmouth, Ohio, nuclear processing plant—backing which contributed to a decent settlement.

These examples—and there are others in *Fear at Work*—of successful coalition work by trade unionists and environmentalists hold out hope for more. Kazis and Grossman's analysis of job blackmail and how it can be resisted in an environmental context can be carried to other struggles as well. Job blackmail has become the employers' big stick in contract negotiations with unions: They wield it to resist union organizing campaigns, hit up state and local governments for tax boondoggles and development grants, ratchet down labor standards in the states, and beat back plant-closing legislation at the Federal and state levels. Victories in environmental struggles can supply lessons for these battles, too.

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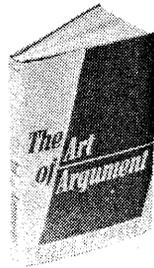
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Over the long term, democratic trade unions, with their millions of members, must provide the overall leadership for a progressive coalition to succeed. At the end of *Fear at Work*, Kazis and Grossman suggest that we can go beyond coalition, that the distinction between workers and environmentalists can disappear. I think workers still have the responsibility for leadership as workers, as the creators of our wealth and the movers of our goods, infor-

mation and services, in building a political force that can break the power of the corporations. But environmentalists are an indispensable element in a labor-led coalition. Put in the hands of both environmental organizers and union shop stewards, *Fear at Work* can help pull it together.

—LANCE COMPA

(Lance Compa works for an international union in Washington, D.C.)