

Environment and Sustainable Development

Background Paper

ACTU Congress 2003

Introduction

1. In 1991, the ACTU Congress determined that the general principles of social and inter-generational equity; conservation of ecosystems and the diversity of species; best practice; economic efficiency and resilience; the costs of structural adjustment and occupational health and safety, should provide the framework for the ACTU position on ecologically sustainable development.
2. Congress recognised that:
 - the long term interests of workers and the community depend upon developing an economy which is ecologically sustainable and maximises job creation, job security, and improved living standards;
 - a sustainable environment and economic development are closely inter-dependent;
 - worsening environmental problems threaten the livelihood and health of workers and their families;
 - conserving and repairing the environment is an urgent matter that requires immediate attention, is important to workers' living standards and can be positive for job creation in sustainable products and services; and
 - the union movement must promote job creation, training and retraining for workers in industries which need to change because of environmental issues/impacts.
3. Congress identified rural land use and land management; forests; pulp and paper; standards for processing plants; energy production, distribution and use; transport; mining; Antarctica; research and development funding; urban environment and planning; and international environmental issues as requiring urgent attention. These remain issues of concern today.

The state of the world environment 2003

4. According to the Worldwatch Institute, State of the World 2003 Report¹, the “impossible” environmental revolution is already happening. The Report documents a host of successes that prove humanity is capable of reinventing the world so that the needs of all are met with minimal harm to the Earth or to future generations. For example:
 - The use of solar energy and wind power have grown by more than 30 percent annually over the past five years (compared to 1-2 percent annual growth for fossil fuels) in countries such as Germany, Japan, and Spain thanks to policies that have encouraged their use;
 - A concerted global effort to reduce the use of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) has led to an 81 percent decline in production during the 1990s, and a marked slowing in the growth of the Antarctic ozone hole, which is expected to soon begin healing;
 - The World Health Organisation’s Global Polio Eradication Initiative has reduced polio cases globally from some 350,000 in 1988 to 480 in 2001; and
 - The Netherlands has achieved an 86 percent recycling rate for cars, and Denmark has put a total ban on aluminium cans in favour of reusable glass bottles
5. These successes offer hope that we can address the serious global threats, which continue to undermine societies and ecosystems around the world. Among those discussed in State of the World 2003:
 - Malaria claims 7,000 lives every day, and affects human development more profoundly than any other disease;
 - Bird extinctions are running at some 50 times the natural rate due to habitat loss and other consequences of human activity;
 - Five and a half thousand children die each day from diseases linked to polluted food, air, and water;
 - The global rate of ice melt has more than doubled since 1988 and could raise sea levels by 27 centimetres by 2100;

¹ <http://www.worldwatch.org/press/news/2003/01/09/>

- as 1 billion people worldwide seek shelter in “informal” settlements, often in precarious places on steep hillsides or floodplains and garbage dumps; and
 - the mining industry consumes close to 10% of world energy, accounts for almost half of all toxic emissions in some countries, and threatens nearly 40 percent of the world's undeveloped tracts of forest. Mining is also the world's most deadly occupation: on average, 40 mine workers are killed on the job each day and many more are injured
6. The environmental and social challenges we face remain enormous, but not intractable. As history demonstrates, people are capable of fundamental change for the better. However, a barrier to change is that a great deal of environmental degradation cannot be seen. Large economies, like Australia, tend to displace the adverse effects of behaviour from the behaviour itself. Few of us ever encounter the toxic waste, soil degradation, or unsustainable mining and logging that support our collective consumption patterns.
 7. It is not that hard, however, to envision the paths that reform will have to take. For example, in the energy economy, the path to reform leads to making current industry more efficient and supporting the expansion of renewable energy sources, and, in materials production, towards greater and more innovative use of recycling.

State of the environment in Australia

8. Thousands of Australia's native animals, birds and plants are facing extinction this century, according to a landmark report, The Australian Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment². This comprehensive stock take of the state of Australia's wildlife, reports that nearly 3000 unique natural habitats are disappearing, taking more than 1500 species with them. Even Northern Australia, previously thought to be relatively untouched, is showing signs of severe degradation, with native mammal species like bandicoots and wallabies, crashing in the Kimberley region and the Northern Territory.
9. Land clearing is revealed as the greatest threat, past or present, to Australia's biodiversity. Other threats include overgrazing, feral pests, firewood collection, poor fire regimes and salinity.
10. **Salinity** is one of Australia's greatest challenges. According to the ACF, in the lifetimes of our grandchildren, more than 17 million hectares - an area more than twice the size of Tasmania - could be lost to the salt. The costs of lost agricultural production and damage to the environment and built infrastructure are likely to climb above \$1 billion a year. Scientists estimate that thousands of Australia's unique

² <http://www.acfonline.org.au/asp/pages/home.asp#top>

native plant species are at risk of becoming extinct unless we can halt the spread of dry-land salinity.

11. **Water** is and always has been a scarce resource in Australia. The demands of our cities, agriculture and industry have traditionally taken precedence over the needs of the natural environment, thus diminishing the flows of our rivers.
12. Our rivers have been diverted, dammed and used for waste disposal, but they can be returned to health by promoting the return of water to the environment, establishing appropriate water pricing regimes, leaving our wild rivers in their natural state, preventing dams and weirs on rivers of high natural and cultural value, and encouraging better agricultural practices.
13. It is asserted by the timber industry that it is now capable of meeting all of the demands of Australia's construction, pulp and paper and wood products from purpose grown plantation forestry, with a much greater economic efficiency than the native forest sector. However, in May 2003, the ACF released the Marsden Jacobs Report - "[Forestry and National Competition Policy](#)", which revealed that state forestry departments are continuing to under-cut private plantations by subsidising the logging of native forests with taxpayers' money.
14. June, 2003, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) launched a National Agenda for a Sustainable Australia, including a Five Point Test for a Sustainable Future:
 1. show national leadership;
 2. cut greenhouse pollution;
 3. repair our land and rivers;
 4. protect great natural areas, and;
 5. support for sustainable living.
15. Results of polling commissioned by the ACF, demonstrate the public's desire for stronger action by our national leaders. A survey of voters in electorates along the Murray River and in suburban Melbourne revealed the policies of the major parties lagged behind the expectations of the electorates.
 - 54% think the federal Liberal Government is not concerned enough about the environment and 46% think the federal Labor Party was not concerned enough;
 - 64% say the health of the environment for future generations is more important than the health of the economy for future generations (19%);

- 78% believe Australia should reduce greenhouse gas emissions - Australia is the highest, per capita, greenhouse polluter in the world and has been for a long time; and
- 53 % are in favour of increasing environmental flows to our rivers, while 31% favour maintaining existing levels of irrigation ³

What have unions been doing?

16. Since 1991, many unions around the world have turned their attention to need for sustainable development. One Victorian joint union / community initiative recognised that there are '*no jobs on a dead planet*'⁴.
17. Internationally, trade unions played a significant role in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Rio+10, in Johannesburg, South Africa. The ICFTU summed up the results of the WSSD as a 'mixed bag'. The ICFTU welcomed the social nature of some WSSD conclusions, but was critical of the lack of strong commitments on vital questions including health and safety, agriculture, energy, bio-diversity and, to an extent, water.
18. ICFTU General Secretary, Guy Ryder, explained, "work, workplaces, and working people are the essence of the social pillar. It is through opportunities for decent work that millions of those who are today trapped in poverty can have access to sustainable livelihoods. It is by making workplaces safe and healthy that people can meet their needs in acceptable conditions. And it is only through the respect of the fundamental rights of workers that they can be fully engaged as architects of sustainable production processes."
19. Trade unions battled during the Summit for fundamental change - in development priorities, in governance, in attitude and behaviour. In spite of the disappointments, trade unions are genuine partners in sustainable development and are committed to moving forward.
20. Given the nature and extent of the problems that face us locally, nationally and globally, it is time for the union movement to refocus and build upon its commitment to sustainable development and social justice outlined in 1991.

³ <http://www.acfonline.org.au/asp/pages/home.asp>

⁴ Earthworker