



Social Studies

Blue-Green Alliances

Overview

Students will:

- Learn about the trend of labor unions joining forces with environmental groups to fight for common goals.
- Survey fellow student and parents regarding the rights and protections they expect in the workplace.
- Read aloud a César Chávez speech, then craft speeches about the rights or protections that students should be guaranteed, using a similar format.

Terrain Articles:

“Catching Drift,” *Terrain*, Summer 2003, page 18.

“Unions, Environmentalists Unite Against Walmart,” *Terrain*, Spring 2003, page 12. (Back issue available online.)

Introduction

A **labor union** is an association of workers formed to promote and protect the welfare, interests, and rights of its members. As a group, they can negotiate with their employer to determine the conditions of their jobs and come to an agreement. This process – called collective bargaining – is a right guaranteed by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), a federal law passed in 1935 which gave employees the right to join unions.

In general, employers want to maximize profits and maintain control over decision-making. Therefore, many companies would rather their workers not join or form a union because belonging to a union gives employees more power than they would otherwise have. The employees can stand together to ask for changes in such things as health benefits or the safety of the workplace. The company no longer has the freedom to do entirely as it pleases because the workers can fight back and be supported by their union as well as the government.

Environmental organizations come in all shapes and sizes. Many are simply small groups of citizens that come together in a town or neighborhood to share their concerns and organize ways to deal with a specific threat to the air, water, soil, plant life, animals, or humans where they live. Some environmental groups are larger in scope, with thousands of members who contribute time or money so the group can advocate for environmental causes at the highest levels of decision-making, such as the state or federal government.

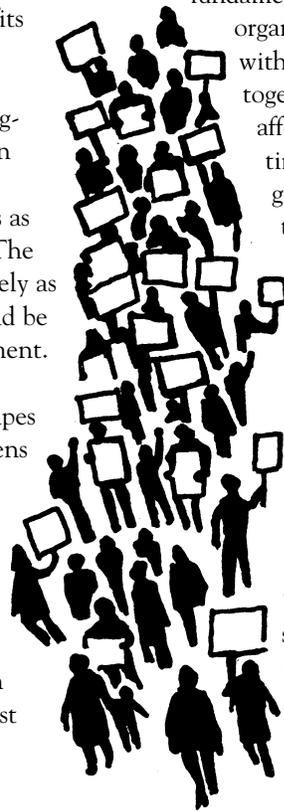
Environmental groups undertake activities such as funding studies, bringing lawsuits against polluters, lobbying government officials to pass laws to protect the environment, and organizing campaigns to heighten public awareness about environmental issues.

Joining Forces

Environmental groups and labor unions have a few fundamental things in common; both types of organizations have been formed when individuals without much power or influence have banded together to demand a say over the decisions that affect their quality of life. There have been many times when labor unions and environmental groups have fought the same foe: companies who turn a deaf ear to worker’s and/or citizens’ complaints. In the past several decades, activism on the part of both unions and environmental groups has resulted in the passage of laws to protect the health, safety, and environment of workers and the surrounding communities.

Yet labor unions and environmental groups have rarely worked together, and at times, they have even been pitted against each other. But in recent years, these two factions have begun to form alliances to pursue common goals.

“**Blue-green alliance**” is the name given to a strategic partnership formed between a union and an environmental group around a specific issue – “blue” referring to “blue-collar” workers, and “green” referring to environmentalists.



CA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARD: History and Geography 11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government. 5. Trace the advances and retreats of organized labor, from the creation of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations to current issues of a postindustrial, multinational economy, including the United Farm Workers in California.



California Case Studies: Examples of Blue-Green Alliances

Pesticide Protection

Farmworkers and residents who live near fields are often exposed to toxic agricultural chemicals. Pesticide drift—the airborne movement of pesticides away from where they were applied—is the culprit in over half of California’s reported acute pesticide poisoning cases. Drift remains unregulated, many sufferers are uninsured, and the fines for drift violations are minimal. The United Farm Workers—a union—has joined forces with Californians for Pesticide Reform and Pesticide Action Network (PANNA) to document and draw attention to the problem of pesticide drift. Together they have published a study about the problem. Local residents are organizing a hotline, and PANNA is developing technology to better measure and report drift incidents.



Walmart Superstore

Environmental groups against sprawl have joined with the United Food and Commercial Workers Int’l Union (UFCW) to fight Wal-Mart’s plans to build “supercenters” in many California towns. Supercenters are 24-hour goods-and-grocery stores that take up many acres of land on the outskirts of towns and traditionally draw shoppers away from supporting local businesses. Oftentimes, local merchants are forced to close their doors. The increased traffic to the discount outlets and the paved acreage they sit upon cause increased air and water pollution. Wal-Mart discourages its workers from unionizing.

Pacific Lumber

After Maxxam Corporation bought Pacific Lumber in 1985, the company began to harvest old-growth redwood forests in Humboldt County at an alarming rate. Maxxam cancelled an employee retirement plan for Pacific Lumber workers and laid off 10% of the workforce. When unionized aluminum workers were locked out of their jobs by another Maxxam subsidiary, an alliance formed between the United Steel Workers of America and many environmental activist groups, including Earth First and the Sierra Club. Together they have organized protests, lawsuits, and environmental impact studies. This cooperation led to the formation of the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, a group dedicated to finding common cause among environmental and labor activists.



Jobs Versus the Environment

Time and again, corporations and government officials have claimed that the cost of complying with environmental, health, and safety regulations will be so high that companies will go out of business and jobs will be lost. As a result of this perception—that workers and citizens must choose between jobs and a safe, healthy environment—labor unions and environmentalists have often found themselves on opposite sides. Often, union members have prioritized hanging on to their jobs. However, there have been union activists who have questioned whether the choice is necessary. In 1976, Leonard Woodcock, then president of the United Auto Workers, told a gathering of union members and environmentalists:

The idea that businesses will be driven to bankruptcy if strict environmental standards are adopted is the same tired line that has been brought up again and again since workers first organized to improve working conditions. It was brought up when child labor was eliminated, when the minimum wage was introduced, when Social Security and Unemployment Insurance were developed.

Essay Assignments

Your family depends on your income. You work in a plant with chemicals that give you rashes. The same chemicals are released into the air through the factory’s smokestacks, causing health problems in the surrounding community. Citizens are organizing a campaign to force the plant to reduce its harmful emissions. The company’s top management claims that the cost of reducing those emissions will force the plant to lay off workers.

1. As a worker, what would you do in this situation and why? Ask one other person in your family—someone older than yourself who is working—what he or she would do. Is your opinion on this similar to or different from your family member’s opinion? Why?

2. Your company has run ads to publicize their claim that tighter emission controls would lead to lost jobs. But the company won’t let reporters see information that could prove this claim right or wrong. Should you take the company’s word at face value? What’s the alternative?



Gauging Our Expectations

Activity A

Students will survey their peers and parents regarding benefits and protections in the workplace. They will contrast the expectations of their peers to those of the working adults in their family.

Survey Your Schoolmates

- Survey:** Conduct a survey in which you ask ten fellow students the following questions and record their answers.
 - What are five basic benefits or protections you expect in the workplace?
 - Which of those benefits or protections, if it wasn't provided to you, would convince you to quit your job?
- After completing the survey, give the teacher a list of all the responses you received.
- Discussion:** Teacher will compile all responses on the board and lead the class in a discussion, asking, "Do you think these expectations are radical or unreasonable? Do you think they were considered radical or unreasonable at one time? Why? When do you think that time was?"

- Homework:** Select one of the job expectations listed on the board and research whether that right or protection is guaranteed by law to all working people. (Suggested resource: www.nolo.com)
- Extra Credit:** Find out when the right or protection became codified into law. Historically, who has pushed for the right and who has pushed against it?

Your Parents' Expectations

- Ask a parent or older family member the same questions that you asked your fellow students in the survey. Ask these questions in addition:
 - Would you say your expectations are being met in your current workplace?
 - How do you think your workplace expectations differ from the expectations your parents had?
 - Would you say that the government or the law has been effective in ensuring these rights/protections?
 - What are some workplace rights and protections that don't exist that should in the future?
- Take notes on what your parent or older family member tells you and share their responses with the class.

César Chávez Speech

Activity B

Students will read aloud and discuss a passage from a César Chávez speech, then write and perform a speech about students' rights, using a similar format.

Teacher Directions

- On the facing page is a passage from a speech labor organizer César Chávez gave in 1989 following a 36-day fast. The fast and speech were meant to bring attention to the suffering of farmworkers poisoned by pesticides.
- Read "Background of Speech" aloud to the class.
- Ask for volunteers or assign students to stand before the class and read the speech aloud as if they were speaking to the audience Chávez addressed. Each student will be assigned to read one part.
- Before or after the reading, you may wish to explain a few terms your students may not be familiar with, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, agribusiness, lobby, and bureaucrat.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Chávez felt he had to fast for 36 days? What rights or protections do you consider so important that you would fast for?

- Who did Chávez represent? What factors might have made it difficult for those people to stand up for their rights?
- Of the groups that Chávez mentions in his speech, whose job do you think it is to protect workers from dangerous pesticides? Why?

Group Speech

- Class breaks into groups of 3-5. Each group brainstorms rights or protections that they believe students should have at school.
- Group will choose one of those ideas and use it as the basis for a speech similar in format to Chávez's.
- Format:** The first paragraph will describe the right or protection students should have and why. The next sentence should ask who is going to stand up for students and guarantee them that right. The following paragraph will identify different groups who should stand up for that right but may not due to conflict of interest or other considerations. Conclusion can be a reiteration of the problem, a call to action, or a plea to the audience.
- Group will perform their speech before the class.



Speech by César Chávez

Background

César Chávez began organizing Latino farm workers in the 1960s. In 1962, Chávez, along with others, founded the National Farm Workers Association in California, a union that later changed its name to the United Farmworkers of America (UFW) and became a part of the major umbrella organization for unions, the AFL-CIO. The UFW achieved significant gains for farm workers through successful boycotts of agricultural products.

In 1988, Chávez ended a 36-day fast which was meant to bring attention to the lack of pesticide protection offered to farmworkers. About the fast, Chávez said, “The plague of pesticides on our land and our food... threatens to choke out the life of our people and also the life system that supports us all. The solution to this deadly crisis will not be found in the arrogance of the powerful, but in solidarity with the weak and helpless.” In March of 1989 he gave a speech at Pacific Lutheran in Tacoma, Washington, that outlined why the union should make protecting farmworkers from pesticides a priority, when farmworkers have so many other struggles, like low wages and hard working conditions. “There is nothing we care more about than the lives and safety of our families,” he explained. This speech in its entirety may be found at www.ufw.org/fast.htm.

“Who will protect farm workers from poisoning if it isn't the farm workers' union?”

“The Environmental Protection Agency won't do it. They're in bed with the same agricultural and chemical interests they are supposed to regulate. It was an accident of history that E.P.A. got stuck with regulating pesticides. It happened after the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration – which is supposed to safeguard all American working people – refused to protect farm workers.”

“The law won't do it. Agribusiness lobbied mightily to exclude farm workers from federal job safety and health laws. And they won. Too many people still think of small family farmers – an image corporate agribusiness likes to promote. But we all know what farming is today in states like California: a \$14 billion a year industry dominated by huge corporations...

There has never been a law at the state or national levels that has ever been enforced for farm workers and against growers: child labor, minimum wage and hour, occupational health and safety, agricultural labor relations.”

“The agricultural industry won't do it. It's out to maximize profits. Using smaller amounts of safer chemicals more wisely is not in the interest of chemical companies and agribusiness groups like the Farm Bureau that have heavy financial stakes in maintaining pesticide use.”

“Universities won't do it. America's colleges and universities are the best research facilities in the world. But farm workers are of the wrong color; they don't speak the right language; and they're poor. The University of California, and other land grant colleges spend millions of dollars developing agricultural mechanization and farm chemicals. Although we're all affected in the end, researchers won't deal with the inherent toxicity or chronic effects of their creations. Protecting farm workers and consumers is not their concern.”

“Doctors won't do it. Most physicians farm workers see won't even admit their patients' problems are caused by pesticides. They usually blame symptoms on skin rashes and heat stroke.

Doctors don't know much about pesticides; the signs and symptoms of acute pesticide poisoning are similar to other illnesses. Doctors who work for growers or physicians with close ties to rural communities won't take a stand.”

“The growers, the chemical companies and the bureaucrats say these are acceptable levels of exposure.

Acceptable to whom? Acceptable to all the other farm workers – and their sons and daughters – who have

known tragedy from pesticides? There is no acceptable level of exposure to any chemical that causes cancer. There can be no toleration of any toxic that causes miscarriages, still births, and deformed babies.”

“Isn't that the standard of protection you would ask for your family and your children? Isn't that the standard of protection you would demand for yourself?”

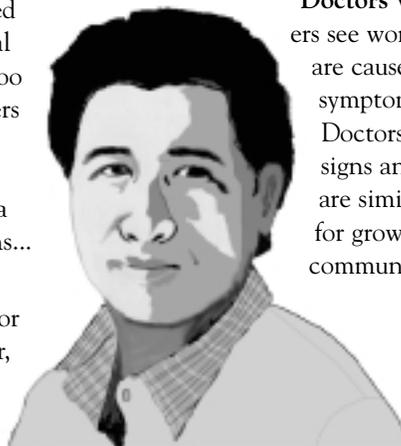


Illustration by Reyna de la Cruz