In order to talk about relations between the environmental movement and the labor movement, it is important to start with the reality that there is not one environmental movement, any more than there is one labor movement.

I’m going to talk about three different environmental movements and their relationships with unions and labor activists.

* First is the conservation movement, which is, to students of environmental history, different from the preservation movement, but for our purposes we can speak of them together because the objective of both is to limit if not eliminate human impact on the natural world; which to a lumberjack or mill worker means eliminating their jobs.

Through most of our country’s short history we exploited, cut down and milled our forests and hunted wildlife as though there was no tomorrow. Then tomorrow came and we began to realize that our abundant natural resources were in fact finite. One response to that realization was the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, signed into law by yes…Richard Nixon, the same Richard Nixon who signed the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts and the National Environmental Policy Act, but more about those later.

The Endangered Species Act triggered one of the first and most dramatic and long lasting feuds between environmentalists and working people, and I use those words purposefully. The enviros who came up with the Endangered Species Act were lawyers who saw litigation as the vehicle that was going to save the natural world. Earlier preservationists like John Muir had argued for setting aside whole land masses, special places like Yosemite and Yellowstone, and preserve them from human impact (not factoring in traffic, smog and crowds). But the Endangered Species Act was designed to protect biodiversity, specific species of plant and animal that were threatened with extinction, and to protect them whether on private or public land, whether in a National Park or living on a freeway median.

The most iconic endangered species, the one that stoked the Sagebrush Rebellion, and the later Wise Use Movement, is the Spotted Owl, whose fragile hold on its forest habitat stopped logging in a number of forests. Mind you, there was a lot more going on that impacted logging jobs and especially saw mill and paper mill jobs; trade agreements that made it cheaper to mill logs and make paper overseas for example. But it was the Spotted Owl’s face that decorated many a pickup truck in mill towns.

The lawyers of the NRDC, the EDF, the National Wildlife Federation and others, made their living filing Endangered Species litigation and were fairly tone deaf when it came to understanding how those lawsuits were contributing to the alienation of working people particularly in the Western states. Despite the fact that it was a Republican President who signed
the Endangered Species Act, the Republicans by the time of Reagan embraced the Wise Use Movement and capitalized on that alienation. We are reaping that mess now. And ironically, the major threat today to the Spotted Owl is the Barred Owl, which is invading its remaining habitat; and causing some enviros to actually go hunting Barred Owls.

But in the 90’s, there were some Earth First activists who lived in logging communities who started to make coalitions. You have probably heard of Judi Bari, and Darryl Cherney. But a lot of people don’t know about the alliance that was formed between Earth First! and the Steelworkers over a common enemy, Charlie Hurwitz of the Maxxam Corporation, a junk bond precursor to today’s vulture capitalists, who bought up Pacific Lumber, one of northern California’s largest employers, which had been sustainably harvesting redwood for generations. Maxxam also bought out Kaiser Aluminum and then started clear-cutting the redwood forests as well as pension plans and health benefits of the Kaiser workers.

At the WTO demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, there was a lot of talk about “Teamsters and Turtles” but the real enviro/ labor coalition on the streets were the Steelworkers and Earth First! They formed the “Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment” which went on to make real progress in overcoming hostility on a grassroots level between labor activists and enviros. Unfortunately the Alliance, ASJE, only lasted a few short years and never significantly expanded beyond the two founding organizations.

There had been an earlier fairly unique coalition between the AFL-CIO and some national environmental organizations in early opposition to NAFTA. Unions were focused on the inevitable migration of jobs to Mexico as US capital moved to where the wages were lowest and the environmental regulations most lax. Environmentalists were worried about the notion of nontariff barriers to trade, which was shorthand for environmental and public health regulations which got in the way of corporate profits, and the “investor rights” clause which allowed corporations to sue a country for enforcing those regulations. They correctly predicted that this would be used to override environmental advances in US states and countries.

The anti-NAFTA coalition held firm as long as there was a Republican in the White House. But Bill Clinton, in rounding up the votes to pass NAFTA, cleverly diluted and divided the opposition as he was so good at doing. He tacked on “labor and environmental side agreements” that said no more than that each country had to enforce its existing labor and environmental laws and set up oversight panels with absolutely no teeth. This was sufficient to induce some enviros to leave the anti-NAFTA coalition and the AFL-CIO to back off far enough to give Democrats cover for passing both NAFTA and the WTO.

To this day, while the unions and environmental organizations give lip service to opposing NAFTA style trade agreements like the current TPP, it is next to impossible to get most of them to deliver on threats not to support Democrats who vote for those very agreements. Ron Wyden, and even Kurt Schrader come to mind. As much as union members might feel betrayed by the mainstream DLC style Democrats, their leadership, with some notable exceptions, sees no alternative. The same is true for environmentalists. This election cycle, however, many of the rank and file are jumping ship, in both directions -- something we can talk more about.
Another key environmental movement – of quite different origins and character from the conservation movement -- was the toxics movement which is usually dated from the publication in 1962 of “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson. The real hero of the toxics movement is in fact a labor leader, Tony Mazzochi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. It was Tony who realized that if song birds were being made sick by toxics then the workers in the chemical plants were on the front lines. And of course he was right. He was the force behind OSHA, and worked tirelessly to get environmentalists to care about workers’ health and safety.

When I was at Greenpeace, we worked on a number of campaigns with OCAW, trying to shut down particularly pernicious chemical plants in St. Charles, Louisiana, and hazardous waste dumps in Ohio and elsewhere.

What made it possible for OCAW to talk about shutting down dangerous workplaces was the idea that Mazzochi introduced of a SuperFund for Workers, later known as “Just Transition”, which would provide workers in chemical plants, nuclear plants and coal mines with guaranteed wages, pensions and benefits if their work disappeared because of a health or environmental imperative. The funds would come from the polluting corporations and the federal government.

It was this simple idea that would have, could have, should have united unions and environmentalists in many settings, but while both sides embraced “just transition” in theory, in practice it was always bargained away.

It was the toxics movement that gave birth to the environmental justice movement, starting with the People of Color Environmental Caucus in 1992. Which communities most often live near chemical plants, near hazardous waste dumps, near oil refineries and transit stations? Communities of color. There is a clear common interest between those communities and the workers inside those plants, but OCAW was one of the few unions to act on that common interest -- and with Greenpeace and Lois Gibbs’ Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, argued for a just transition for the surrounding communities as well, for clean up and resettlement if necessary.

And then there is the Climate Movement.

Labor has come a long way since it joined forces with the fossil fuel industry to scuttle US support for the 1997 Kyoto Accords. Since then, there have been several climate coalitions focused on labor involvement. In 1998 I was hired by the Sweeney Administration to be the Director of Strategic Campaigns at the AFL, with the task of broadening community support for labor struggles. At the same time, Sweeney hired Jane Perkins, former head of Friends of the Earth, as a Special Assistant. Jane and I worked together to try to build a Blue Green Alliance, to find a way for labor to join environmentalists to address climate change.
We knew what had to happen: We had to pair a transition to clean energy with a real demand for green jobs with union wages here in the US. We couldn’t continue to outsource construction of solar panels and wind turbines. We couldn’t import steel and cars for high speed rail. This is the infrastructure investment we all know needs to be made right here, right now. And we know where the money could come from, from a carbon tax -- or from a financial transactions tax.

But for years the labor movement has set its sights too low. We end up clinging to the jobs we have now, the jobs that are disappearing so rapidly, because we don’t trust the Democrats, much less the Republicans, to take the action we all know is necessary. So you have the Building Trades battling for the Keystone Pipeline or the Bakken oil jobs and feeling betrayed when the public sector unions or the AFL-CIO join a climate coalition.

The only way to heal that breach is to fight for infrastructure investment, with union wages, at the same time – and as militantly -- as we fight to close coal mines and oil fields. We can’t settle for “climate adjustment assistance” any more than we should settle for “trade adjustment assistance.” We need green infrastructure, and that means jobs, not assistance.

It is the young people in the climate justice movement that give me the most hope at the moment, because it is the young people who have brought the issue center stage, who are militant and tireless and uncompromising. (Those same young people who aren’t afraid to be labeled socialist!)

Interestingly, and significantly, Senators Bernie Sanders, Jeff Merkley and Ed Markey last year co-sponsored a “Clean Energy and Just Transition Act” which is a significant part of Bernie’s platform in his presidential bid. But it will only see the light of day if we make it happen. No matter who is president, no matter who is in Congress, we need to build a coalition, a militant, focused, unrelenting coalition to make this happen. Remember, Richard Nixon didn’t sign all those environmental bills because he was a closet Green. It’s up to us!!