

Senior Editors' Note

With issue 85 of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, we are excited to present a volume dedicated to the theme of the Environment and Labor. Kate Brown and Thomas Klubock, both members of our Editorial Board, have assembled a powerful set of articles that breaks through the barriers between labor history and environmental history. They compel us to see the centrality of the non-human in our human histories. As *ILWCH* is uniquely positioned to do, we bring together pieces that explore the links between labor and the environment through case studies of individual regions as well as transnational comparisons from around the world. Our investigation of this subject appears in three sections of the issue: Articles, Reports from the Field, and Review Essays.

The articles take the study of labor and environment in a number of new directions. As Brown and Klubock explain, previous work in the area has focused on extractive industries or agricultural production and addressed the ways in which those settings and their labor processes shaped management strategies, labor militancy, and occupational health struggles. The articles contained here take up new settings and pose different problems.

One of these is the relationship between labor and environmental conservation. We see unexpected instances of workers in the United States actively promoting conservationism and its ethics, from itinerant mining and logging workers in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Joanna Dyl's piece to members of the United Auto Workers with respect to nuclear power in the 1950s in Jacquelyn Southern's study.

Another problem taken up by these pieces is rationalization and modernization. Alan Mikhail finds that in nineteenth-century Egypt, the rise of massive irrigation projects under the auspices of the state led to a shift from localized, self-managed labor to coerced labor based on mass relocations of workers. This displacement of long-standing labor systems culminated in interlinked ecological and human disasters. Thomas D. Rogers' study of rationalization and modernization in Brazil reports that the new Task Table system—to elaborately categorize and control jobs—in the 1960s opened a door to military regime management but at the same time allowed for workers to devise counter measures to reassert control over their labor and access to agricultural work. Rogers, as well as Jenny Smith in her study of Soviet farms after the post-Second World War, elucidate the gender dimensions of modernization projects. Smith's study also reveals that Soviet mechanization, instead of displacing labor, often reinforced labor-intensive practices. Her article pushes us to reflect anew on the human, social, and ecological consequences of Soviet “modernization.”

International Labor and Working-Class History

No. 85, Spring 2014, pp. 1–3

© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2014

doi:10.1017/S0147547914000040

The “commons” is another subject treated in depth in this volume of *ILWCH*. The location, function, and meanings of these forms of property are discussed in essays by Steven Stoll and Gunther Peck. Stoll investigates the changing role and meaning of garden plots in the Appalachian mining communities of the United States. In the early twentieth century, as a consequence of deforestation due to logging, the residents of Appalachia went from inhabiting a diverse ecological landscape to one in which small garden plots subsidized dependence on low-wage labor. During the Great Depression, however, these gardens became integral to the New Deal’s efforts to combat agrarian poverty and promote economic autonomy. Gunther Peck uses an international lens to take up the question of how to conceptualize the commons—something that by definition is place-based—through periods of mass movement of labor across borders. Peck proposes a concept of global or transnational commons—both non-human nature and built landscapes—that are indispensable to workers’ migrations across national borders. In addition to historical examples, he draws on recent conversations taking place at the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil.

This issue’s “Reports from the Field” reveal the centrality of environmental struggles to contemporary labor conflicts—from Latin America to China. Aviva Chomsky and Steve Striffler describe the coming together of coal miners, indigenous communities, and environmental activists in Latin America to fight the damage wrought by mining on workers, local communities, and regional ecosystems. The authors link the production of Colombian coal to energy consumption in North America in their analyses and demands to prevent further environmental degradation and health hazards. Contrary to popular assumptions about unions in extractive industries, organized labor has been critical to this effort. Sanjiv Pandita takes us to Chongqing, in Zhong County, China, where there has been a massive migration of workers from the countryside to new industrial areas. Pandita reflects on the human cost of the “China Miracle” that has been paid primarily by workers who suffer from poor health, often due to abysmal working conditions. Pandita draws out the persistent tragedy of industrial disasters for women workers in particular. From the Zhili fire in China to the Tazreen fire and the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, and stretching back to the Triangle Fire of 1911 in New York City, women workers have been subjected to locked doors, windows, and fire exits, given no safety drills, and left with no way out, their young lives cut short. Pandita’s report also looks at the difficult struggle for official recognition (and therefore treatment) of occupational diseases such as silicosis. Yet the piece stresses the new forms of worker organization that have emerged from these tragedies, which have pushed for greater safety and more attention to health in the workplace.

Finally, we offer two review essays on recent publications at the intersection of labor and environmental history. John Soluri highlights four books—Myrna Santiago’s *The Ecology of Oil*, Thomas Andrews’ *Killing For Coal*, Thomas Rogers’ *The Deepest Wounds*, and Linda Nash’s *Inescapable Ecologies*—to

open a broader historiographical discussion of “hybrid” labor-environmental histories in the Americas. These books, writes Soluri, “situate working people in worlds that are at once historical and spatial, social and ecological.” Yet, while pointing to books that have successfully told stories of labor upheavals in conjunction with environmental factors, Soluri suggests that establishing credible causality between ecological and social change continues to be a major challenge. He pushes historians to rigorously decipher the relationship between environmental change and the timing and content of workers’ collective action. Bringing these fields together is not so easily done, he concludes, for “labor histories... tend to be structured around events occurring in discrete periods of time, and environmental histories... often trace long-term processes of change.”

Douglas Sackman’s essay focuses on US borderlands with Mexico, Canada, and the Pacific. Seeing borders in terms of “a two-way traffic in labor and nature,” he asks us to consider the ways in which they have been permeable filters. Invoking “the biopolitics of borders,” Sackman argues that biopower should be reframed “to include the life of nonhumans as well as people caught up in transborder traffic.” The essay carries us from the varied labors of Mexican migrants to the guano and whaling industries of the Pacific to logging and salmon fishing in British Columbia, Canada. Similarly, the fencing and policing of the US-Mexico border affects humans and non-humans as freedom of movement is curtailed. With this vantage from the borderlands, Sackman contends that the blending of environmental, transnational, and labor history can free historians from the imperatives of nationalism and nation-based histories.

Together, the articles in *ILWCH* 85 offer what Kate Brown and Thomas Klubock refer to as “a spatial analysis of class formation and labor.” They raise exciting new questions for historians to pursue further and connect them with on-going movements for economic justice.

Carolyn Brown, Jennifer Klein, and Prasannan Parthasarathi