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# Good Jobs, Green Jobs:

## *Why Workers' Rights to Organize are Critical to the Green Economy*

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“We reject the notion that we have to choose between good jobs and a clean environment. It’s not one or the other. It’s both or neither.”

~ Leo Gerard, International President, United Steelworkers (USW)

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**G**lobal warming represents not only one of the greatest challenges we face as a generation, but also a tremendous opportunity to move towards a clean energy economy where creating good jobs and protecting the environment go hand in hand. It has been projected that a \$100 billion investment in the greening of our economy over the course of two years will create 2 million new jobs nationwide. Such investment in green recovery and infrastructure would create four times more jobs than spending the same amount of money within the oil industry, and could roughly triple the number of good jobs paying at least \$16 dollars an hour.<sup>1</sup>

One way to help ensure that these green jobs will also be good family-supporting jobs is to allow workers a democratic chance to form unions. That’s why the Sierra Club supports the *Employee Free Choice Act*, which would give workers a fair and direct path to form unions without the fear of being fired, help employees secure a contract with their employer in a reasonable period of time, and toughen penalties against corporations who violate their workers’ rights.

### **Why Being Green Should Mean Being Blue Too**

In recent years, trade deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have led to the off-shoring of more than 1.5 million jobs.<sup>2</sup> These agreements have enabled companies to relocate to countries with weak or non-existent protections for workers and the environment, incentivizing reckless behavior in pursuit of corporate profits.



In addition, the American worker has been besieged by shrinking wages that fail to keep pace with inflation,<sup>3</sup> increased healthcare costs<sup>4</sup> and uncertain futures as pension plans have been put in jeopardy and retirement funds continue to disappear.<sup>5</sup>

Given the current financial crisis, it is more important than ever to focus on farsighted policies that will strengthen the American workforce. Unions can provide a counter balance to corporate greed by giving workers a voice on the job about safety, security, pay, benefits, and about the best ways to get work done. Union members make on average 30% more than non-union members<sup>6</sup> and nearly 80% of unionized workers receive health insurance, compared with 49% of non-union workers.<sup>7</sup>

However, the current labor law system makes it difficult for workers to form unions. Employees who try to form unions are routinely harassed, and often even fired. Among private sector employers whose workers try to form unions, 25% have illegally fired at least one worker for union activity.<sup>8</sup>



## Why Unions Are Better for the Environment

Protecting workers' freedom of association is closely linked to efforts to protect the environment and communities. Workers serve as the front line of defense against hazardous pollution, chemical spills and other accidents that can devastate communities. Union workers are better trained to know about the health and safety risks of hazardous chemicals and have greater protections if they blow the whistle on hazards and accidents in the workplace.

Across the country, union workers have worked to hold corporations accountable for pollution that threatens both workers and the environment. As an example, the United Steelworkers filed a lawsuit that forced the state of California to protect its residents from the chemical PFOA (C8), used in the manufacture of Teflon, which has been linked to birth defects and increased cancer rates.<sup>9</sup> Steelworker members in New Jersey were also instrumental in preventing a chemical treatment plant from dumping the effluent from treating highly toxic nerve gas agent VX into the Delaware River.

Organized labor has played a critical role for decades in passing some of the strongest environmental policies and regulations in the United States, supporting legislation like the Clean Air Act and the Occupational Health and Safety Act, pushing the implementation of the Toxics Release Inventory, and fighting to keep workplaces and communities safe from dangerous chemicals and pollutants.

Allowing workers the basic right to form a union and to play a greater role in the workplace will be essential to the success of a green and healthy economy. The Employee Free Choice Act would give workers the ability to work for decent pay, be treated with dignity, and take care of their families.

**The green economy holds great promise to build the American middle-class. One way to ensure that it benefits the many rather than the few is by passing the Employee Free Choice Act.**

## Footnotes

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