

# LABOR-ENVIRONMENTAL COALITIONS



## Lessons from a Louisiana Petrochemical Region

*Thomas Estabrook*

*Work, Health and Environment Series*

Series Editors: Charles Levenstein and John Wooding



CRC Press  
Taylor & Francis Group

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# **Dedication**

***For Sibylle, Elias, and Jonah***



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## CHAPTER 1

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# **Labor and Environment: Out of Crisis, a Progressive Spark\***

Since the early 1980s, coalitions of labor, community, and environmental groups have emerged in response to environmental and occupational health problems and rapidly deteriorating conditions for organized labor, working people and the poor. These coalitions are part of a global popular struggle challenging the destructive consequences of the globalization of capital. They are part of the rise of community-based, working class environmentalism. They are closely related to the emergence of a wide variety of labor-community alliances focused on job preservation and creation, a living wage and economic development, a process which has forced the previously separate notions of “community” and “labor” more to overlap, while remaining respectful of differences. The environmentalism redefined by the working class grassroots—including women, people of color, and labor—has little to do with protection of wilderness and the natural environment. It has everything to do with protecting human health and improving economic well-being.

A dominant feature of working class environmentalism is the emphasis on the protection of, and restitution from damage to, community health, as exemplified by the antitoxics activism at Love Canal and Times Beach, and the environmental justice activism in Warren, North Carolina. A less common tendency of working class environmentalism is the focus on increasing democratic power and control over production decisions and the distribution of industrial wealth, a position expressed by coalitions such as the Labor-Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles. Many labor-community coalitions have arisen partly as tactical and strategic responses by both local labor unions and communities to protect and expand union jobs in an era of dwindling rank-and-file membership and political power for unions. Within this context these coalitions have increasingly defined the environment and the local economy, environmental and economic justice, as

\*All endnotes are at the end of each chapter.

interlocking. The extent to which workers and community members are able to forge common self-interests to wage a united struggle against violations of workers' rights, contamination of workplace and community, and local underdevelopment, is a fundamental question addressed by this book.

This book examines the social and geographical conditions under which one of the most well-established labor-environmental coalitions in the United States, the Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project, emerged and achieved success. It looks at problems the 16-year-old Project faced as it developed; the degree to which it came to address a broader economic agenda; and the impacts it had on occupational and environmental health, both policy and practice, as well as economic development. Examining closely a single historical case of labor-community collective action helps illustrate general problems and issues experienced by many labor-community coalitions elsewhere in the United States.

The Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project, which went into hibernation in 2002, represented a multiscaled collaboration of labor and environment to fight forces at once local and global. This study assesses how the community process interacts with the global process to define the dynamics of the local struggle. "Environmentalism," "community," "working class," and "labor" are all concepts that have important geographic significance.

The problem of labor-environmental collaboration at the local level is in essence a problem of capitalist development versus local collective action. This book examines local labor-environmental collaboration in terms of how social relations—economic, ideological, and geographic—shape collective action and capitalist response. The Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project resulted from a larger economic crisis within global capitalism that led corporations to cut labor costs and avoid or reduce environmental and health and safety costs. The economic crisis is rooted in the destructive and exploitative tendencies of capitalist development, which are potentially destabilizing for capital by undermining the basis of expanding capital accumulation, particularly the health and economic security of workers and communities, as well as environmental quality. At the same time, threats to worker, community and global health present political opportunities for new forms of social movements and collective action. While corporations may have a seemingly large supply of workers, communities, and nature to use in their accumulation practices, capitalist development ultimately faces real limits, in part forced upon it by social resistance and government regulation. The crisis of global capitalism, therefore, is a major factor in the emergence of new forms of collective action.

To understand the role of ideology—a system of language, ideas, culture, and the consciousness that arises from—in shaping the Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project requires that we look at how labor, community, and social movement groups have defined the concepts of environment, community, and working class. Since the establishment of American urban ethnic communities in the mid-19th century, there has been a conceptual separation of workplace and community, in

part connected to actual spatial separation of the two in many places (Katznelson, 1981).<sup>\*</sup> In urban settings, "environment" was generally a community but not a workplace concept, and the linking of the two was more the exception than the rule. In contrast, in many rural and small town settings such as coal mining and mill communities, where worker and community health were intimately related, integrated definitions of environment and health were maintained. In both urban industrial and rural contexts there was a history of attempts to link workplace and community environments, as during the Progressive Era when activists regarded health as socially defined, thereby linking workplace and community environments; working-class interests were central to the public health movement of that era.

The concepts of working class and labor, as well, have changed over time, and today hold different meanings and relevance than thirty or forty years ago. In the past, "Labor" has too often regarded itself in opposition to women and oppressed social groups in the community, resulting from the gender division of labor, in which men, who dominated "labor," were involved in the production sphere, while women were defenders of the reproduction sphere, or community (Cobble, 1993; Nast, 1994). The gender division helped maintain the split between community space and production space. Yet this view of labor in opposition to women and community is gradually changing, given the transformation of the labor movement during the past decade. Labor-community coalitions face the challenge of redefining "labor" to be more inclusive of people of color and women.

The concept of "community" is vague and relative, tied to specific social and historical contexts. For instance, organized workers have typically defined themselves as a community of workers, particularly during periods of increased solidarity. Indeed, for workers, the "community of workers" may serve as the primary community. Such a community can be local, regional, national, or international, depending on the extent of the workplace struggle. Community can also refer to a local urban or rural residential community; a community of social movement activists, geographically local or extensive; and organized, multiclass constituencies such as oppressed groups, liberal churches, and liberal elected public officials. In this study "community" refers to residential community, unless otherwise specified. In certain instances I refer to environmental community, religious community, and labor community. In recent labor-community coalitions, the "community" is often comprised of multiclass groups with middle class or professional leadership, who are generally poorly experienced at social mobilization. In contrast, unions tend to have a unified class base and a clear, narrow set of goals; as such, they generally provide the sustaining impetus in labor-community coalitions (Mantsios, 1998; Moody, 1988; Yates, 2001). Yet at the same time, unions are weakened by racial and gender discrimination and business unionist bureaucracy. The coalition process itself represents potential for

<sup>\*</sup>All references start on p. 211.

both unions and communities to confront their separate weaknesses. On the one hand, community partners in labor-community coalitions, particularly those steeped in civil rights activism and neighborhood direct-action militancy, provide useful models for unions to challenge their own internal weaknesses, particularly their exclusivity. On the other hand, unions may bring a democratic organizational process to coalitions, including the need for specific sets of attainable goals.

The impact of historical changes in defining labor, community and environment needs to be explored in the context of capitalist development. The development of the Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project involved significant new definitions of environment, health and community. Environment is conceptualized by workers and community to include community and workplace health, as well as economic development, such as public services, while community is defined to include industrial workers. By comparison, capital's definition of environment and community works to its advantage, dividing workers from residential community when necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Further, struggles over community and working class identity and over health, in the context of capitalist development, are geographic. Identity and health are increasingly defined in more places and on various scales, which fundamentally alters the way labor, community, and the environmental movement view themselves and their grievances against capital and the state. As capital becomes more globalized, the crisis it creates and fosters are increasingly challenged by new forms of local and multiscale collective action. The growing inability of state institutions to confront crisis creates openings for labor and community to experiment. As such, worker and community collaboration occurs at a level not seen since the 1930s. The Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project succeeded because of the multiscale nature of collective action, involving national-level organizations working closely with community-based and local union organizations and taking advantage of primarily local state political opportunities. That is, the project succeeded because it tied together the politics of multiple local places to challenge capital's domination of space. Yet the project eventually failed because it no longer effectively mobilized resources at multiple scales.

### **LABOR-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IN THE LITERATURE**

There is a growing body of literature on labor-community collaboration, some of which is theoretically informed (Fine, 1998; Jonas, 1998; Wills, 1998). Numerous empirical studies documented aspects of the recent history of these alliances. Brecher and Costello (1990) examine the rapid growth of such alliances in the 1980s in response to the economic and political effects of industrial restructuring, such as job loss and cutbacks in social services.

Several authors have examined labor-environmental coalitions in theoretical depth (Foster, 1993; Keil, 1995; Mann, 1993; Rose, 2000). Rose (2000) considers class tensions in collaborative attempts between workers and environmentalists in the Pacific Northwest, concluding that middle-class/working class alliances are possible but difficult to sustain because of incongruent class cultures. Keil (1995) theorizes the emergence of labor-environmental coalitions in reference to the Toronto-based Green Works Alliance, focusing on the struggles of building a common agenda. Gottlieb (1993) outlines the dynamics and history of labor-environmental coalitions, although others, too, have explored the recent history of such collaboration (Faber and O'Connor, 1993; Grossman, 1985; Kazis and Grossman, 1982; Siegmann, 1985). Foster (1993) provides an important class analysis of logger/environmentalist tensions in the Pacific Northwest. Several other writers (Noble, 1986, 1990, 1993; Wooding, 1990) have made reference to links between community environmental groups and labor over reduced state enforcement of environmental and health and safety standards. None of these studies, however, address the emergence of labor-environmental coalitions in explicitly historical-geographic theoretical terms.<sup>2</sup>

Several theoretical studies, while not speaking directly to coalitions, do speak to the conditions keeping labor and community apart. Katznelson (1981) locates the cleavage between workplace politics and community politics in the cultural traditions of American ethnic communities. Castells (1983) and Saunders (1981) argue that the locus of collective action has shifted from the production sphere to the consumption sphere.

Heiman (1989, 1996) explores the convergence of grassroots working class segments in helping to bring about more effective pollution controls, and provides a clear geographic theoretical analyses of working class environmentalism as a project challenging global capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The environmental justice literature (Bullard, 1993; Faber, 1998; Harvey, 1996; Heiman, 1996; Hofrichter, 1993; Pulido, 1996) is rich with analysis of class- and race-based communities challenging the state and corporations over the destructiveness of polluting facilities. Lerner's (2005) study of environmental justice activism in Louisiana's "cancer alley" examines how one particular community waged a successful international campaign to get Royal Dutch/Shell to finance the relocation of the community out of a heavily contaminated environment. Environmental justice analysis argues that environmental and economic regulation has failed to protect the health and economic well-being of working class communities and communities of color. Environmental justice activists promote a transformation of regulation from the current system of lax environmental enforcement, endemic lack of economic opportunity, and lack of corporate and governmental accountability, to a system of sustainable economic and social development, regulated by socially just institutions. Recent efforts to link environmental, public health, and labor interests on issues of clean production, "just transition" (economic support for workers and communities affected by job loss due to environmental policies), and



the precautionary principle illustrate how environmental justice, public health, academic, workplace health and safety, and union interests can find common ground and forge progressive strategies (Gottlieb, 2001).

Case studies and theoretically informed studies of labor-community coalition-building tell us that there has been a rapid growth of such coalitions since the 1980s as a response to economic crisis. These coalitions have achieved important successes and brought about important new political relationships, including collaboration of different working class segments, to challenge corporations and government. But the studies also tell us that there are powerful historical conditions that prevent and challenge coalitions, including class tensions and the cultural divide between workplace and community. We need to develop a theoretical framework for a better understanding of how labor-community coalition-building is part of the process of intervening in capitalist crisis. Such a framework is vital to understanding the role of leadership, the class experience of organizations, and the particular context of industry and the state in shaping the development of coalitions.

This book uses a historical materialist framework to examine how labor-community politics arise out of the destructive character of capitalist development, and explores such collective action as part of the process of mediating and resolving capitalist crisis. The analytical framework follows the ideas of Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971), and emphasizes contradictory political and ideological arrangements that maintain capital accumulation, particularly during economic crises. It views the socially and ecologically detrimental effects of capital accumulation, and the resistance movements against those effects, as a social struggle primarily over political and ideological hegemony, and secondarily over economic hegemony. Such an approach has been criticized for not considering sufficiently the significance of economic processes.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to address this problem, the work presented here incorporates a structural analysis of capitalist development (Harvey, 1982, 1991; Smith, 1990) and a structural political ecological analysis (J. O'Connor, 1988). Both related approaches are deeply embedded in economic processes. From this core approach I draw heavily on approaches that are related to a Gramscian framework, particularly "regulationist" approaches.<sup>5</sup> Gramscian and regulationist approaches bring into focus political and ideological practice, the openness and importance of counterhegemonic strategies, particularly political strategies for collective identity formation, and consider the state as a fluid, open, and contradictory set of social institutions.

Gramsci argued that collective action comes about through an historically specific process, in which intellectual leadership observes and theorizes about specific economic relations, then educates and organizes a class or social group, and seeks to develop workable political strategies that can best confront crisis. Building in part on Gramsci, regulationist approaches address the way crisis is regulated and capital accumulation stabilized. They argue that mediation of crisis

is an open and volatile process involving conflict, experimentation, and compromise. As such, social movement institutions, along with state agencies, have a role in intervening in crisis.

## THE LOUISIANA PROJECT

The Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project was an alliance of members of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical, and Energy (PACE, formerly the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers) union, Local 4-620<sup>6</sup> and a network of grassroots environmental groups in the petrochemical industrial area around Baton Rouge, Louisiana. By the time of its decline in 2002, this coalition was one of the oldest community-based coalitions in existence. While there are numerous other labor-community alliances working on production and health issues, the OCAW coalition was selected because in 1990, at the time this work was conceived, the coalition sought to institutionalize and consolidate its coalition work. The consolidation phase was deemed a crucial moment in a coalition's development by virtue of a shift from short-term tactics to longer-term strategy.

The coalition grew out of a 5-1/2 year lockout by the BASF Corporation at its Geismar, Louisiana, facility beginning in 1984. Minchin (2003) explores in great detail the emergence of labor-community collaboration during the BASF lockout. BASF locked out 370 OCAW union members of Local 4-620 over disagreements about wages and benefits. The lockout was part of a series of attempts by BASF to decertify and break unions at its facilities around the country in the early 1980s. Soon after the lockout began, the OCAW International sent several organizers to find a way to break it. The organizers built relationships with local environmentalists and began a corporate campaign that targeted not only BASF's facility in Geismar and elsewhere, but other industrial plants in the petrochemical corridor around Baton Rouge. The OCAW and its environmental allies forced the corporation to lose tens of millions of dollars by revealing environmentally destructive practices at BASF, and brought pressure to bear on the company by digging up environmental and health and safety violations at other Louisiana industrial facilities. Moreover, OCAW's corporate campaign helped bring about state regulatory policy changes, notably the creation of an "environmental scorecard," which would tie industrial property tax breaks to corporate environmental protection practices. To broaden the fight against billions of dollars in state subsidies to industry, OCAW helped launch the Louisiana Coalition for Tax Justice in 1989.

Soon after the lockout ended in December 1989, the union members agreed to fund half of a \$50,000 year coalition with the National Toxics Campaign, including a full-time community/environmental organizer who would organize local community residents around health and economic issues, and would track BASF's workplace environmental, health, and safety violations. The union chose to fund the coalition as a way of returning support to the community that had

supported it during the lockout. In 1990, the Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project was formed, with an advisory board consisting of OCAW leaders and local grassroots environmental activists. Since that time, the project organized four local community organizations in Ascension Parish, which successfully demanded the creation of a public water district and water delivery system and the installation of a 24-hour air monitor of industrial pollution, both in the community of Geismar. The project was also successful in blocking the construction of an international airport in Ascension Parish, restricting hazardous materials transport on rural residential roads, and passing an Ascension Parish ordinance requiring industries and their contractors to report their job hiring records when applying for municipal bonds, in order to get local employers to hire more local labor. Further, the sister organization Louisiana Coalition for Tax Justice, by organizing an African-American community in neighboring Iberville Parish over industry's failure to alert the community during a toxic air release, helped force a federal civil rights review of industrial practices. In the late 1990s, the Labor-Neighbor Project organized a broad coalition of more than twenty religious and community organizations, called Louisiana Communities United, over a four-parish area. LCU and Labor-Neighbor were instrumental to the success of a high-profile campaign to halt the siting of plastics production facility in a low-income African-American community in St. James Parish. Altogether, the Labor-Neighbor Project became a recognized force for environmental justice advocacy and broad-based organizing in the region. In 2002, the Labor-Neighbor Project suspended operations in the wake of organizational problems.

### **NEW COALITIONS, NEW MOVEMENTS**

Labor/grassroots environmental alliances represent a significant counter-hegemonic experiment in social movement collective action by endeavoring to overcome long-standing divisions between workplace politics and community politics in the United States. Moreover, they hold great potential for efforts to build a universal progressive political project, while balancing the politics of difference. Such alliances can potentially challenge capital at the workplace and in the community; help labor to overcome retrenchment, and communities to arrest their downward slide, experienced under economic restructuring; and aid the grassroots environmental movement by deepening its base of support and by lending it the political organizing experience and knowledge of industrial polluters that labor has. Though fraught with obstacles, both internal (such as class ideologies) and external (such as the jobs versus environment mindset), labor-environmental-community coalitions constitute a serious attempt to transcend the failures of progressive organizations in broadening their grassroots power base.

Precisely because labor-community alliances have potentially great political meaning for progressive social change, they are an important subject of research.

This study extends our understanding of the complications involved in forging a new form of identity politics between community and workplace within a specific context of global capitalism. It demonstrates how labor and the environment have dealt with material and ideological obstacles, and political opportunities and limitations. Finally, it assesses how far these alliances can realistically and potentially go in building political power and shaping environmental, occupational safety and health, and economic development policy and practice.

Critical to understanding what happened in Louisiana is Gramsci's analysis of hegemony and building a counterhegemonic politics, which is central to the discussion of labor-community politics, and its interrelationship with the politics of capitalist development. Chapter 2 examines theories and concepts relevant to creating a theory of labor-community coalitions. After examining several theories of uneven capitalist development, including geographic theories, I consider political ecology analysis, the main insight of which stresses that capitalist production perpetuates crisis by threatening and degrading the conditions of production upon which it depends—namely, labor, urban space and infrastructure, and the natural environment. This makes clear the ways in which capital redefines nature, in order to render “natural” the destructive use of nature, an important aspect of the way in which the ideological terrain is altered.

Chapter 3 considers the long history of labor-environmental collaboration and division in the United States. Common political projects between labor and community in urban industrial settings have been the exception rather than the rule throughout much of the past century, even after the onset of economic restructuring in the 1970s and 1980s. The infrequency of collaboration in the urban context is attributable to spatial and conceptual divisions between workplace and residential community. These divisions have been closely associated with capitalism since early industrialization and are widely understood to have major importance for the trajectory of class politics in this country.

As with the trench-like divisions between workplace and community, labor and environmental organizations, too, have largely been apart, and often in opposition, over the past 100 years. The split between workplace health and community health in this country is well-rooted in the pattern of segmented conceptualization of workplace and community politics since early industrialization. Despite general separation, periods of heightened collaboration between labor and community environmental groups occurred: the Progressive Era, the 1960s/early 1970s, and the 1980s and 1990s. The 1930s saw a rise in labor-community collaboration during numerous campaigns by CIO unions. The periods of greater labor-community and labor-environmental collaboration are noted for an increase in diversity of unionism and social movements, and a broadening of their political agendas. Even during periods of greater labor-community collaboration there have been tensions between insurgency and reform, between collective action based on diversity and flexibility and that based on uniformity and rigid institutionalization. Sometimes heightened labor-community collaboration is met by a

backlash from corporations and government, as illustrated by the passage of the punitive Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Taft-Hartley circumscribed labor rights, in particular by outlawing solidarity strikes, and was a response to the CIO and its successful community collaborations in the 1930s.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with a historical geography of the Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project. Chapter 4 examines the background and evolution of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Worker's community collaboration through 1989. Louisiana history demonstrates precedence for labor-community collaboration, but no definitive, recurrent pattern of such cooperation. The state has a rich history of union militancy, with numerous efforts in building multiracial unions in periods of intense racial segregation. Many of these efforts drew informal, short-term tactical community solidarity. The Catholic Church was an occasional ally to workers. Antiunion corporate politics in tandem with narrow economic strategies of Louisiana labor unions, however, cut short nearly all collaborative experiments. With the passage of right-to-work legislation in 1976, Louisiana labor unions, guided by business unionist strategies focused on preserving wages and contracts at the expense of building union political power and expanding union membership across the state, were in serious trouble.

BASF's 5-1/2 year (1984-89) lockout of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers took place as the company sought a flexible solution to increased competition in the petrochemical industry. The union responded with a campaign unprecedented in Louisiana, drawing on the International's experience in coalition-building and environmental and workplace health issues, and on the leadership and experience of key community and environmental activists. In the process of collaborating with, and learning from, community and environmental leaders, the union members developed an environmental consciousness. The union's local politics included efforts to apply direct and indirect pressure on BASF through issues of pollution and illegal tax exemptions. By using a particular environmental issue, and facilitated by effective long-term relationship-building with key state environmental officials, the union successfully pressured the company to end the lockout.

Chapter 5 looks at the Labor-Neighbor Project's development after 1990 and includes an examination of persisting obstacles to coalition-building. Since the end of the BASF lockout in 1989, OCAW consolidated and expanded its labor-community political project. Previously a short-term tactic oriented to ending the lockout, the union's relationship with the community became a longer-term strategy. The new project was accompanied by the development of a "coalition consciousness." The union became committed to developing a highly localized coalition politics in Ascension Parish. What began as a handful of activists in one community, developed into five local civic groups throughout Ascension Parish. More recently the project turned to linking church-based organizing with its previous base of civic groups. No longer a joint endeavor with the National Toxics Campaign, since that group's demise in 1993, the Labor-Neighbor Project

continued to be a union-led endeavor. Its organizing initiatives changed the politics in Ascension Parish through the creation of a local waterworks district; efforts to include the petrochemical companies in a new municipality; and other attempts to exert popular control over local space. In the late 1990s, the Project organized a coalition of twenty religious and community organizations, Louisiana Communities United, to address economic and environmental justice problems in four river parishes. After 2001, the Labor-Neighbor Project suffered organizational setbacks due to staffing and funding problems.

Chapter 6 presents a discussion of what happened to make the Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project develop, endure, and decline. Structure and agency in the project's development are considered while comparisons are drawn to other labor-community collaborations. The Labor-Neighbor Project is a new spatial politics structured by the spatial character of capitalist politics, mainly the petrochemical industry; the relative openness of the state; and the class experience of labor and community. Labor-community alliances are typically initiated by a dire economic situation for labor, overlapping with a community environmental crisis. The coalition agenda broadens over time from one or several issues to many issues. Significantly, for a coalition to endure and thrive, it must ultimately strengthen its coalition capacity, that is, it must build leadership skills and coalition-building skills on the part of labor and community leaders. It is experienced and skilled leadership that can maximize the use of a coalition's resources, particularly national resources, which is vital to the overall health of the organization. Over the long term a coalition must become explicitly progressive by broadening its leadership to include both working class and middle class leaders, and by challenging the state and corporations directly over economic and environmental justice issues, such as corporate welfare, pollution in working class communities, and lack of equitable economic development.

The Labor-Neighbor Project was emblematic of labor-community coalitions of the past twenty years, in that it represented a new spatial politics, addressing production and reproduction together. The project built a successful politics during the 1990s because it developed its coalition capacity—including awareness level, outside resources, and leadership skills—through a back-and-forth, discursive process among labor and community members. Such development of coalition capacity was enabled by OCAW's constant class-based intellectual leadership and the enduring organizing influence of the National Toxics Campaign and local "bridge-builders," aided by the significant multiscale resources that OCAW and the NTC legacy could bring to the effort. The Labor-Neighbor Project succeeded as long as it sustained the dynamic combination of building coalition capacity and the important provision of leadership and resources from OCAW and the NTC legacy. This dynamic prevented the project from slipping into parochial politics and buffered the coalition process against capitalist interference throughout the 1990s. The project suffered, however, when OCAW and its organizing partner could no longer provide adequate intellectual

leadership and resources to the project's community leaders, which underscores the potential fragility of leadership and national resources. Gramsci's analysis of leadership in building a counterhegemonic project helps us to understand labor-community coalitions by considering how coalition intellectual leadership is rooted in the shifting political economy and how coalition politics is open and contested.

## ENDNOTES

1. For instance, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, passed under heavy lobbying by the business community, provided legal limits to a union's base of solidarity. By outlawing secondary boycotts—the right to picket other companies and boycott products from those companies—Taft-Hartley severely circumscribed the community of labor, helping to isolate unions from one another and from communities.
2. Some of these authors employ political economic theory but do not focus on coalitions or do not consider geographical dimensions (Faber and O'Connor, 1993; Noble, 1986, 1990, 1993; Wooding, 1990). Others focus on coalitions but do not express theory within the context of global capitalism (Gottlieb, 1993; Grossman, 1985; Kazis and Grossman, 1982; Siegmann, 1985).
3. See also Hamilton's (1993) geographically-informed analysis on the importance of the people of color environmental justice movement in challenging destructive conditions set up by global capitalism.
4. Jessop (1990b) argues that Gramsci and neo-Gramscian theorists (Debray, 1973; Laclau, 1977; Poulantzas, 1978) generally underplay economic constraints rooted in the general laws of capital accumulation.
5. Regulationist approaches build on the work of the French Regulation school (Aglietta, 1979; Lipietz, 1987), expanding it to consider social movements (Hirsch, 1983; Jenson, 1989; Mayer, 1991). Other theoretical analysis informed by Gramsci are considered, including state theory (Foucault, 1980; Jessop, 1990a, 1990b; Poulantzas, 1978); poststructural political ecology (Escobar, 1995; M. O'Connor, 1993); New Social Movement theory (Habermas 1991, 1984; Melucci, 1985, 1980; Offe, 1985; Touraine, 1985); and discourse analysis (Baudrillard, 1981, 1975; Foucault, 1980; Jameson, 1984; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Young, 1990).
6. PACE was created in 2000 through the merger of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) and the International Paper Workers Union (IPWU). Throughout most of this book I will refer to OCAW rather than PACE, since the analysis focuses largely on the premerger period. PACE merged with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) in 2005 to become the United Steel Workers (USW).

## **CHAPTER 2**

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# **Building a Theory of Labor-Community Coalitions**

Difficult and demanding circumstances have prompted labor and community organizations to increasingly forge alliances during the past 30 years. Successful labor-community coalition building happens because of a convergence of leadership, effective organization, and political economic circumstances. In this chapter, relevant ideas in political economic and social movement theory are examined to help explain the political and social significance of coalitions. Labor-community coalitions are part of an overall challenge from civil society to the dominance of business and industry in public policy. Political economic context is considered, including changes in capitalist development, government regulation, and related changes in the labor and environmental movements during the past thirty years. Of particular importance is the role of government in enabling civil society coalitions, providing political opportunities for collective action, while at the same time supporting capitalist development. Finally, this chapter considers the organizational capacity of collaborative projects to mobilize resources at different geographic scales, and to build solidarity by appealing to universal interests while overcoming particular interests.

### **HEGEMONY AND COALITION-BUILDING**

The Louisiana Labor-Neighbor Project and other labor-community coalitions must be seen as part of a long-term strategy of building a countervailing force to the dominant political economic bloc of big business and government allies. Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) provided an analysis of hegemony, or social group domination, a concept that is critical to understanding contemporary labor-community coalitions, including the dynamic of intellectual leadership in social movements and community organizations as it arises from historically specific conditions. Three aspects of Gramsci's analysis of hegemony



are particularly useful: how hegemony is used by a dominant social group, and particularly how it extends beyond workplace and class material issues into a broader civic life of culture and ideology; how the counterhegemonic process operates, including the development of new political strategies and ways to intervene in crises of the capitalist system; and how hegemony is an open and conflictual process within the state. The concept of hegemony is important for understanding coalitions in both an analytical and strategic sense.

Gramsci reinterpreted how capitalism works by giving much more importance to human consciousness and action in shaping historical events. He saw the relationship between political action and economic reality as fluid and open. This fluid relationship means that people's understanding of economic crisis and political and ideological power relations is critical to creating political strategies that intervene in, or mediate, the crises of capitalist development (Femia, 1981). With his core concept of hegemony, Gramsci argued that ideology and culture were important in maintaining the rule of dominant class and other social forces. Gramsci emphasized several conflicting areas of hegemony. Hegemony meant, on the one hand, the organization of consent to a complex set of class and social forces under moral and intellectual leadership of the capitalist class, a set of forces known as a historic bloc. A ruling historic bloc consists of fluid, organically linked institutional practices of government, business, and civil society, which help to stabilize capitalist development, and a unified set of state relations. It is through dominant, or hegemonic, relations and institutions, Gramsci argued, that capitalist crises are mediated, or managed. Secondly, hegemony involves coercive practices—legal, ideological, or other forms of pressure—used by the hegemonic bloc to maintain popular support for its projects. Thirdly, hegemony refers to potential counterhegemonic projects made up of the working and middle classes and their allies, and how such projects can develop political strategies to intervene in capitalist crises.

In a current understanding of hegemony, the hegemonic bloc employs coercive strategies such as downsizing, subcontracting, plant closings, and forcing communities to compete with one another for businesses and jobs. At the same time the dominant bloc of social forces elicits consent from civil society in workplace bargaining, economic development, and policy changes such as utility or environmental deregulation, which tend to benefit the hegemonic bloc rather than the general public. The dominant bloc also builds consent through the market by creating consumer demand for products and services, reaching the point of "market triumphalism" in many aspects of everyday life (Peet and Watts, 1996). The hegemonic bloc, in effect, institutes its policies and agenda in civil society through coercive methods, using its superior economic position, and through consent, by exercising ideological, moral leadership through social institutions such as the media, education, and political parties (Boggs, 1976; Epstein, 1990). Today the hegemonic bloc promotes numerous neoliberal (or free market) solutions to social and economic problems.