



# The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies

*Edited by*  
Nora Räthzel · Dimitris Stevis  
David Uzzell

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Labour Studies

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Editors

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*For Mike Cooley*

*An inspirational trade unionist whose concern for nature, the ingenuity and skills of workers and the needs of people were inseparable.*

## Praise for *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*

“This pathbreaking, impressive collection presents and defines the crucially important emerging discipline of environmental labour studies. A sustainable future for our planet cannot be achieved without engaging workers. Its wide-ranging and thought-provoking essays showcase the interdisciplinary, international, engaged research that focuses on the ecological agency of working people: rural and urban; waged and unwaged; subsistence, service, industrial and extractive. It is an excellent guide to assist effective efforts to mitigate climate change.”

—Verity Burgmann, *Monash University, Australia*, author of *Green Bans, Red Union*

“Inspiring reading for trade unionists and all activists engaging in struggles against climate catastrophe, and building transformative models for social, economic and climate justice. This book challenges us to think about Just Transition in radical ways, contesting existing unequal power relations and laying the foundations for new forms of democratic control.”

—Alana Dave, *International Transport Workers Federation*,  
Urban Transport Director

“What an impressive and invaluable resource, providing major theoretical insights into the relation between labour, the environment and ‘nature’, on the basis of detailed studies of historical developments and current struggles across the globe. The book is remarkable for its range of international coverage and offers a striking contribution to this emerging field.”

—Miriam Glucksmann, *Department of Sociology, University of Essex*,  
author of *Women on the Line*

“I highly recommend this nuanced and engaging Handbook that analyses in-depth how capitalism produces nature and nature produces capitalism. It brings together a remarkable range of theoretical approaches and experiences that embraces Marxism, feminism, post-materialism, environmentalism as well trade unionism making this a truly cutting-edge collection. It is a landmark in the field of environmental labour studies.”

—Wendy Harcourt, *International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands*, editor of *Feminist Political Ecology and the Economics of Care—In Search of Economic Alternatives*

“The global pandemic has revealed a gaping wound at the centre of capitalism—a systemic insecurity in the lives of those whose work matters more than we ever

imagined. This timely collection of impassioned essays does more than simply archive the ongoing struggle. It paints a rich narrative of the many possibilities for change: providing a colourful canvas of ‘real utopias’ from communities across the world.”

—Tim Jackson, *University of Surrey, UK*, author of *Post Growth, Life After Capitalism*

“Climate change and the loss of biodiversity pose existential threats for our species, but the transformation needed to address these environmental challenges poses major tests for our movement of organised labour and social justice around the globe. Just as no country can address environmental degradation alone, neither can one trade union solve the conundrums posed. We need to learn from each other’s experiences within the global labour movement and find common collective responses. Only in this way, can we ensure that social justice and worker participation is at the centre of our response to cleaning our planet. I hope this collection of essays will contribute to that common endeavour.”

—Judith Kirton-Darling, Deputy General Secretary,  
*IndustriAll European Trade Union*

“In the course of colonial and neo-colonial economic globalisation, founded on structures of statism, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and anthropocentrism, both workers and the environment have been marginalised and exploited. Yet, there has been extremely insufficient attention given to the interface between the two, and indeed often they have been seen as opposed to each other due to narrow notions of environmentalism or of labour rights. This book does an enormous service by collating an impressive range of essays analysing these aspects, and the possibilities of integrating worker and ecological interests and rights, towards fundamental transformation towards a just society.”

—Ashish Kothari, Co-founder of the *Environmental Action Group Kalpavriksh*,  
author of *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled*

“When the late Tony Mazzocchi, a leader of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, introduced the idea of just transition to labor and environmental activists in the late 1970s, very few took him seriously. This stunning compendium of research and analysis shows just how far this idea has traveled and how richly it has developed around the globe. Clearly, now more than ever, we need to study and pursue the paths outlined in this book to sustain both the planet and its working people.”

—Les Leopold, Executive Director of the *Labor Institute*, author of *The Man Who Hated Work and Loved Labor: The Life and Times of Tony Mazzocchi*

“This handbook is an outstanding intellectual and political tool. It contains a remarkable collection of essays on the multiple dimensions of the labour environmental struggles against the destructive logic of the (capitalist) system, including not only trade-unions, but also, among others, farmers, indigenous communities and



intellectuals, both in the Global North and the Global South—as well as a discussion of various anti-systemic alternatives, from the Green New Deal to Ecosocialism.”

—Michael Löwy, *CNRS (National Centre of Scientific Research), Paris, France*, author of *Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe*

“Compared to indigenous and other rural peoples at the vanguard of socio-environmental resistance against mining, fossil fuel extraction, hydropower and oil palm plantations, the industrial trade unions are not often counted among the environmentalists. They are sometimes reluctant to accept the ‘decarbonization’ of the economy. We know however that the industrial and rural working class has long fought against asbestosis, pneumoconiosis and other occupational illnesses. This impressive and magnificent book analyses many kinds of labour, waged and unwaged, and its variety of experiences in India, South America, the United States, Europe, Africa, in a new research field on ‘environmental labour studies’ uncovering many practical opportunities for ‘red-green’ alliances.”

—Joan Martínez-Alier, *ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain*, author of *The Environmentalism of the Poor*

“A comprehensive exploration of the struggles, conflicts, achievements and potential of working class, indigenous, gender and other grassroots movements in relation to ecological sustainability that re-thinks conventional notions of labour to embrace unpaid, social and nonmarket work.”

—Mary Mellor, *Northumbria University, UK*, author of *Money: Myths, Truths and Alternatives*

“The editors have delivered to us an essential resource in the midst of unprecedented planetary crisis. After decades of being told we must choose between ‘jobs’ and ‘environment,’ this collection points towards an extraordinary alternative synthesis: of planetary justice and the work of humans and the rest of nature. Revealing the historical, geographical, and economic tissues that bind class, labor, and webs of life, the handbook reminds us that, when it comes to the ‘proletariat’ and ‘biotariat,’ an injury to one is an injury to all.”

—Jason W. Moore, *Binghamton University, USA*, author of *Capitalism in the Web of Life*

“As somebody who pioneered the incorporation of the environment into the trade union movement and of the social dimension into the international environmental and climate agenda, which culminated in the incorporation of the ‘just transition’ demand into the Paris Agreement, I see this work as essential in order to understand one of the most creative transformations of our time.”

—Joaquín Nieto, Director of the *Spanish Office of the International Labour Organisation*



“A pioneering and valuable international study. Shows how trade unions are advancing just transition, environmental justice and a future of work that is fair for all. A thought-provoking read for everyone who wants to build a greener, more equal global economy.”

—Frances O’Grady, General Secretary, *Trades Union Congress, UK*

“In outlining the emerging trans-discipline of Environmental Labour Studies, a complex global field of lived tensions and structural contradictions, the editors have assembled a pioneering anthology. Not least, their innovative inclusion of essays builds on the materialist ecofeminist argument that relations between gender, labour, and nature, are sociologically entangled.”

—Ariel Salleh, activist, *Australia*, author of *From Eco-Sufficiency to Global Justice*

“Environmental Labour Studies help us to understand a way forward towards our common future. This globe-spanning volume marks the coming-of-age of this crucial theoretical and empirical field. The original and insightful contributions gathered here dramatically expand our understanding of how work, workers, and trade unions interact with the environment, nature, and environmentalists.”

—Victor Silverman, *Pomona College, Department of History, USA*,  
Emmy-winning filmmaker and author of *Imagining Internationalism*

“Capitalism and its international corporations know no limits in their quest to put profit above life and nature. The Movement of Landless Workers (MST) in Brazil, along with Via Campesina all over the world, have defended what is urgent and necessary now: land, water, forest and minerals must be used in harmony with nature to protect biodiversity and for the common good. This volume brings together timely reflections on these serious problems that our planet is facing.”

—João Pedro Stédile, leader of the *Brazilian Movement of Landless Workers*

“In order to win the fight to address our manifold sustainability challenges we need the labor and environmental movements to come up out of their silos and work together. The editors have offered a pathway for a greater confluence of these movements in this first Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies. They have assembled a great group of authors who explore the pitfalls and possibilities and show us how we can expand the boundaries of our movements and begin to take down the forces that keep us apart. So long as humanity views the planet as something for us to dominate, we will continue to destroy it. When we realize that living in harmony with nature is first and foremost, then we can begin to repair the damage we’ve done.”

—Joe Uehlein, Founder and President of the *Labour Network for Sustainability (USA)*

“In this timely handbook, leading scholars and practitioners from around the world engage in key issues of environmental labour studies. The handbook is an invaluable contribution with its intellectual depth, breadth of issues, and geographical spread of cases. It’s the first of its kind and should be read widely not only by labour and environmental activists and scholars, but also anyone interested in understanding the challenges and possibilities of overcoming the tensions between labour and the environment.”

—Michelle Williams, Chairperson of the *Global Labour University, and Wits University, South Africa*, author of *The Roots of Participatory Democracy: Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala, India*

“The environment must be protected and sustainable industries must create decent, safe and healthy work. The perspectives in this Handbook can dispel the notion that environmental protection and decent work are in conflict with each other: we must have both, or we will have neither. To build a bridge to the future we need a ‘Just Transition’ for workers, their families, and their communities. Integrating labour and environmental studies is a crucial step forward on that bridge.”

—Brian Kohler, Director - *Health Safety and Sustainability* (retired),  
*Industrial Global Union*

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# Abbreviations

ACFTU	All-China Federation of Trade Unions
AFL	American Federation of Labor (USA)
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (USA)
ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
CCMPPTF	China Coal Miner Pneumoconiosis Prevention and Treatment Foundation
CCOO	Comisiones Obreras (Spain)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEB	Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Basic Ecclesial Communities, Brazil)
CFDT	Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (French Democratic Confederation of Labour)
CGTP	Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers)
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
CONTAG	Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers, Brazil)
COP	UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development (United Nations)
CUPW	Canadian Union of Postal Workers
Defra	Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (UK)
ECWU	Energy and Chemical Workers Union (Canada)
EIUG	Energy Intensive Users Group
EPO	European Patent Organisation
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation

ETUI	European Trade Union Institute
EU	European Union
EU ETS	European Union Emissions Trading System
FO	General Confederation of Labor-Workers' Force (Confédération Générale du Travail–Force Ouvrière)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
GMO	Genetically modified organisms (GMOs)
GND	Green New Deal (USA)
GNH	Gross National Happiness
GUF	Global Union Federation
GWEC	Global Wind Energy Council
HDI	Human Development Index
IAM	International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (USA)
IBEW	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (USA)
IBT	International Brotherhood of Teamsters (USA)
ICEM	International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (now part of IndustriALL)
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IG BCE	IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (Germany)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILWU	International Longshore and Warehouse Union (USA, Canada)
IMF	International Metalworkers' Federation (now part of IndustriALL)
IndustriALL	IndustriALL Global Union
IOE	International Organisation of Employers
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
ISTAS	Instituto Sindical de Trabajo, Ambiente y Salud (Union Institute of Work, Environment and Health, Spain)
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IUD	Industrial Union Department (USA)
IWA	International Woodworkers of America
LNS	Labor Network for Sustainability
MMC	Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (Women Farmers' Movement, Brazil)
MMTR	Movimiento de Trabajadores de las Mujeres Rurales (Rural Women's Workers' Movement, Brazil)
MST	Movimiento des Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement, Brazil)
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (USA)
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement

NEDLAC	National Economic Development and Labour Council (South Africa)
NEHAWU	National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (South Africa)
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSZZ	NSZZ Solidarność (Poland)
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers (South Africa; UK)
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
OCAW	Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers' International Union (USA)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PACE	Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union (USA)
PCS	Public and Commercial Services Union (UK)
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, Brazil)
REIPPPP	Renewable Energy Independent Power Producers Procurement Programme
SAFSC	South African Food Sovereignty Campaign
SAFTU	South African Federation of Trade Unions
SAPP	Southern African Power Pool (SAPP)
SEIU	Service Employees International Union (USA)
TUAC	Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD
TUC	Trades Union Congress (UK)
TUCA	Trade Union Confederation of the Americas
TUED	Trade Unions for Energy Democracy
TUSDAC	Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (UK)
UAW	United Auto Workers (USA)
UBC	United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (USA and Canada)
UCU	University and College Union (UK)
UGT	Unión General de Trabajadores (General Union of Workers, Spain)
UMWA	United Mine Workers of America (USA, Canada)
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNIFOR	Canada's largest private sector union
USFS	United States Forest Service
USW	United Steelworkers Union (USA, Canada, Caribbean)

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# 1

## Introduction: Expanding the Boundaries of Environmental Labour Studies

Nora Räthzel, Dimitris Stevis, and David Uzzell

### Introduction

When we edited our first book about the relationship between labour and nature we focussed on the environmental policies of trade unions across the world (Räthzel and Uzzell 2013). Not much had been published at the time and we sought to bridge the gap that separated research on the environment from research on labour, arguing that labour and environmental movements, though often fighting against each other, had one thing in common: defining nature as labour's 'Other' (ibid., 2). For environmentalists this meant prioritising nature in conflicts between production and the protection of nature, and for unions this meant prioritising workers' jobs. The same gap, we argued, that separated environmental movements from labour movements was

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replicated in the social sciences, where environmental studies and labour studies rarely took notice of each other. Few researchers explored how the labour movement went beyond caring for workers' health and safety at the workplace and addressed forms of environmental degradation such as biodiversity, various forms of pollution or the climate (Silverman 2006; Adkin 1998; Obach 2004). Given that labour and nature are inextricably linked, and since all labour includes a transformation of nature while without non-human nature humans could not exist, work and survive, we proposed that there should be a discipline analysing this relationship, suggesting the term *environmental labour studies*.

Five years later, when we edited a special issue of *Globalizations* on the theme of 'Labour in the Web of Life', things had developed much further. In many countries of the world researchers were studying the environmental politics of trade unions and in the introduction to this special issue we defined environmental labour studies in a broader way, aiming to reach beyond the way in which unions addressed global environmental degradation:

[E]nvironmental labour studies includes all research that analyses how workers in any kind of workplace and community are involved in environmental policies/practices and/or how they are affected by environmental degradation in the broadest sense. (Stevis et al. 2020, 4)

However, the papers in that issue were still largely concerned with the environmental policies and practices of trade unions across the globe. This remains a central topic that needs to be studied, since the deep transformations that are needed to develop societies with a just and caring relation towards nature and working people cannot be achieved without the active engagement of workers and their representatives as especially the authors in Parts I, II, IV and V of this volume show. Nevertheless, there is a divide that workers need to overcome in order to muster sufficient strength to effectively counter the capitalist destruction of workers and nature, namely the divide between industrial workers, subsistence workers, unwaged workers and workers extracting the materials on which every kind of production depends (see for this subject the authors in Parts I–III).

It is obvious that these areas of production could not exist without each other. Satheesh (Chap. 9), analysing the relations between industrial workers, peasants and fisherfolk in India, shows that they can become locked in fierce fights against each other when it comes to environmental issues. The ways in which industrial workers may be oblivious of the living and working conditions of those who supply them with the necessary resources for their work



and life are reflected in the divide between two areas of research: the study of the 'environmentalism of the poor' as Martínez-Alier and others have coined it, concerned with environmental struggles of workers in rural areas of predominantly the Global South, and the study of 'labour environmentalism' concerned mostly with environmental struggles of industrial workers, predominantly in the Global North. In both areas we find research on mining: in labour environmentalism specifically on miners and in the environmentalism of the poor on the devastating effects of mining on rural communities.

Our aim in this book has been to include contributions from both areas of research in order to encourage and facilitate a conversation between them. Language can obscure these connections letting us forget that 'the poor' are workers and that 'workers' are often poor. Both need to fight for global environmental justice to survive. This does not mean that their struggles, strategies, conflicts and aims are the same. Leandro, Vieira Trópia and Rätzzel (Chap. 15), Satheesh (Chap. 9), Latorre (Chap. 12), Bottazzi/Boillat (Chap. 18) and García-López (Chap. 17) explore the living and working conditions of agricultural workers and fisherfolk and the specific environmental struggles resulting from them. Barca/Milanez (Chap. 14) present the legacy of Chico Mendes, a trade unionist and environmentalist, whose vision of a common and respectful usage of the forests is today fought for by a coalition of waged workers, Indigenous peoples and peasants. Comparative research investigating the differences and commonalities of environmental struggles might help to support alliances on the ground. Cock (Chap. 8), Kojola (Chap. 16) and Dobrusin (Chap. 13) provide insights into the possibilities and difficulties of such alliances.

While we broadened the spectrum of environmental labour studies by including research on workers' environmentalism in the agricultural sector worldwide, there is one area of work that we have not been able to cover sufficiently, the huge area of service work. Some aspects of it are covered by Leonardi and Benegiamo (Chap. 31), Houeland (Chap. 21) and White (Chap. 35). If we go by the numbers, this area employs the largest amount of workers worldwide, that is, 50% of all employees (26% of waged labour is in agriculture, a percentage that is steadily shrinking, 23% is in industry, a percentage that is slowly rising (World Bank 2021)). However, numbers are not everything. An important reason why service work has not featured prominently in research on labour environmentalism and the environmentalism of the poor is because the main sources of environmental destruction are industrial mining and manufacturing, transport as well as industrialised agriculture, and the main victims of global environmental destruction are workers in