

Aaron Taylor

Tom Discenna COM

2202

April 17, 2025

Evolution Of the Labor Union Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement

When I look out and view what American history social movements have used powerful and very different strategies to confront systemic inequality and how they go about change. Two of the big movements I wanted to explore more were the Labor Union Movement (1870s–1950s) and the Environmental Justice Movement (1980s–present). Even though they are separated by nearly a century and focused on very different goals the workers' rights in the former and environmental both demonstrate how minority groups organize and push for lasting change due to unfair institutions and inequality at those times so it does not progress to get worse. I think by comparing their historical contexts, methods of persuasion, and policy impacts, it has showed me the highlights of just how activist rhetoric has evolved over time while still maintaining similar goals and objectives even coming to the 2000's.

First, I thought it was interesting that the Labor Movement's fight for fair wages and safer working conditions during industrialization really did lay the foundation and groundwork for many organizing strategies still in use today. I also think the Environmental Justice Movement has brought attention to environmental racism and the unequal distribution of ecological risks in

minority communities. When I started analyzing these movements side by side it reveals how persuasive strategies shift with political climates but retain their power to influence real change. I really think these movements were very clear and I believe still relevant not only to bring up today but because the strategies that were used back then are incredibly alike nowadays.

The Labor Movement emerged during one of America's most intense periods of industrial growth, it started when unregulated capitalism led to very dangerous working conditions and a lot of economic inequality. According to historian David Montgomery in "The Fall of the House of Labor, Factory workers in the late 19th century often endured 14-hour days in dangerous environments, with industrial accidents frequently resulting in serious injury or death. Children as young as eight worked in textile mills and coal mines, while families lived in overcrowded, company-owned housing under constant threat of eviction" (David Montgomery). This was crazy to me and to demonstrate why this movement was so serious and was constructed so quickly because it was really affecting the minority and the groups that had to work these jobs. These harsh realities grew a lot and were widespread in workers organizing, though early efforts were often met with violent resistance from industrial leaders and wanted to keep the conditions the same.

The movement developed through three main phases. As Zieger stated, "The Knights of Labor was formed in 1869, and the first major national organization, but its attempt to include all workers regardless of skill level eventually limited its effectiveness" (Zieger and Gall 47). More radical groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, employed militant strategies such as general strikes and factory takeovers to create change. The New Deal

era marked the movement's peak, it was with the passage of the "Wagner Act in 1935, which legally protected collective bargaining rights" (Lichtenstein 156). By 1954, union membership had reached about 35% of the workforce, reflecting labor's peak political and economic power.

While the Labor Movement did start to address the workplace exploitation, the Environmental Justice Movement came up to fight ecological racism and the disproportionate exposure of minority communities to environmental hazards. "The movement is often traced back to 1982, because this was when residents of Warren County, North Carolina, a mostly Black community, protested the dumping of PCB-contaminated soil in their area by physically blocking incoming trucks" (Bullard 23). This was one of the first big stands and really shows just how fast and organized they were becoming. Although they did not prevent the landfill, the protest became a blueprint and steppingstone for future action by merging environmental and civil rights concerns together to have a bigger support and more defined focus.

In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit formally defined the movement's goals with the drafting of the Principles of Environmental Justice. As Taylor stated in the studying of the movements, "Throughout the 1990s, activists exposed countless instances of environmental racism, from Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" to toxic waste dumps placed on Native American reservations" (Taylor 71). More recently, the Flint water crisis in Michigan was a huge concern and in (2014–2019) highlighted ongoing government negligence in communities of color because this affected a large group of Minorities. Unlike mainstream environmental efforts that often-center conservation, environmental justice reframes ecological issues as inseparable from racial and economic equity.

I do see that both movements developed compelling rhetorical strategies to their respective eras. The Labor Movement emphasized solidarity and collective struggle. The IWW's slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all," exemplifies this message (Fantasia 112). This showed how united they were and how the group was willing to stand together to make their point heard. Strikes were accompanied by a lot of songs and chants that uplifted workers and communicated their demands. Political cartoons in union publications like *The Labor Defender* that criticized capitalist greed and celebrated the dignity of laborers.

In contrast, the Environmental Justice Movement pioneered what Dorceta Taylor calls "citizen science" (118). The community members in polluted areas actually gathered their own environmental data when official agencies failed to act. Personal stories also played a crucial role in parents of children affected by lead poisoning in Flint shared emotional testimonies that made policy failures impossible to ignore. This drastically helped improve the movement and really get more empathy through the persuasion of having something relatable to the public. The rise of digital media made a broader outreach through campaigns like #StopLine3, which used social media platforms to organize protests and spread awareness about pipeline threats to Indigenous lands that with the help of social media was able to expand and grow a lot faster than previous movements. With the help of social media through these movements there is a lot faster response and can gain support and credibility much faster which is what really helps bring awareness. I think as well with how much evolution has occurred in these events that these movements that started at this point really did have an overlapping impact of how people try to get social change done today. I do believe that in these times social media would have had both positive and negative impacts but comparing them to today's standard I think could have reached more people and got to a better spot faster because all these events have the one major thing in common

which is trying to get as much support as possible and relate to as many people. Social media just helps speed this up so I believe that these were benchmarks of what we see with movements today.

The Labor Movement led to major reforms in labor law and workplace safety. With a lot of the major change the fair labor standards act was implemented and as Lichtenstein said, “The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 did introduce the federal minimum wage and mandated overtime pay, while the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 created safety standards for employers” (Lichtenstein 203). Despite these gains and strides the union membership had declined sharply, with only 10.3% of workers unionized in 2023. The economy and anti-union policies continue to challenge labor organizing today and is still an ongoing issue!

As well as, The Environmental Justice Movement has also secured notable policy changes. This was shown in policy from and executive order and as Taylor states, “President Clinton’s 1994 Executive Order required federal agencies to consider environmental justice in decision-making. In 2020, New Jersey passed the first law mandating cumulative impact assessments before approving new polluting facilities” (Taylor 215). To me it is good this issue was being researched but it is crazy how long a lot of these movements take to see real change. On the contrary, communities of color still face disproportionate environmental risks, and the movement continues to battle corporate lobbying and governmental inaction even today. This goes on because even though the country has improved there is still a lot of inefficiency in policy and Minorities still deal with job opportunity, police violence and racist discrimination in the work place and how well the areas are taken care of where they live.

I felt when looking at these movements together it shows how persuasive strategies for social change evolve while maintaining key principles. The Labor Movement's strikes and legislative victories demonstrated the power of mass mobilization. The Environmental Justice Movement combined science with emotional storytelling to address complex, systemic issues that were still on going. Both underscore the importance of persistence, organization, and adaptability in pursuing justice in a system that is against them.

Ultimately, these movements remind me that meaningful change doesn't come from the top down and the rich people and policy makers it must be demanded by those most affected, and a lot are toward the bottom and need the help. As the country does face new challenges like climate change and labor exploitation in the digital age and all the problems social media has brought, the tactics and lessons of past movements remain just as relevant. Their histories show that effective advocacy must evolve and keep up with the times while staying grounded in the pursuit of equity and human dignity.

Works Cited

- Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, Westview Press, 1990.
- Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*, University of California Press, 1988.
- Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, Princeton University Press, 2002.
- David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*, NYU Press, 2014.
- Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions*, 4th ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.