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**The Limits of Environmentalism Without Class:
Lessons from the Ancient Forest Struggle
of the Pacific Northwest***

By John Bellamy Foster

1. Introduction

Many prominent environmentalists today have adopted a political stance that sets them and the movement that they profess to represent above and beyond the class struggle. For example, Jonathon Porritt, the British Green leader, has declared that the rise of the German Greens marks the demise of "the redundant polemic of class warfare and the mythical immutability of a left/right divide."¹ According to this outlook, both the working class and capitalist class are to blame for the global environmental crisis (insofar as it can be traced to capitalist rather than socialist modes of production), while the greens represent a "new paradigm" derived from nature's own values, one that transcends the historic class problem. By removing themselves in this way from the classic social debate, these green thinkers implicitly embrace the dominant "we have seen the enemy, and it is us" view that traces most environmental problems to the buying habits of consumers, the number of babies born, and the characteristics of industrialization, as if there were no class or other divisions in society.

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¹ Quoted in Martin Ryle, *Ecology and Socialism* (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd. 1988), p. 13. See also John Bellamy Foster, "Britain's Green Budget," *CMS*, 3, 2, June 1992.

In contrast, it will be argued here — in the context of a discussion of the crisis of the old growth forest and the timber industry in the U.S. Pacific Northwest — that ecological degradation is an inherent part of the historically specific accumulation process that defines capitalist society and its class struggle.² An ecological movement that stands for the earth alone and ignores class and other social inequalities will succeed at best in displacing environmental problems, meanwhile reinforcing the dominant relations of power in global capitalism, with their bias toward the unlimited commodification of human productive energy, land and the built environment, and the ecology of the planet itself. An earth movement of this kind will therefore contribute little to the overall green goal of forming a sustainable relationship between human beings and nature, and may even have the adverse effect — by splitting popular forces — of creating more opposition to the environmental cause.³

Nowhere is this overall dilemma of class vs. ecology more evident today than in the Pacific Northwest, where the battle to save the last stands of ancient forest has left forest product workers and single-issue environmentalists at each other's throats. In timber dependent communities, "preservationists" have become "enemies of the people," while environmentalists often characterize loggers and other forest product workers as "enemies of nature." "The northern spotted owl," Michael Renner observes in *Worldwatch's State of the World 1992*, "has become a symbol of the seemingly intractable conflict between jobs and environmental protection — and of the larger tensions between the health of the economy and that of the natural world on which it ultimately depends."⁴

The truth is that both a sustainable relation to the forest ecosystem and employment stability for workers in the industry are best achieved through the forging of an alliance between environmental activists and woodworkers around a common labor-environmentalist program aimed at the state. Yet, the narrow conservationist thrust of

² See John Bellamy Foster, "The Absolute General Law of Environmental Degradation Under Capitalism," *CNS*, 3, 3, 1992.

³ For an earlier article on which portions of the following argument are based, see John Bellamy Foster, "Capitalism and the Ancient Forest," *Monthly Review*, 43, 5, October, 1991.

⁴ Michael Renner, "Creating Sustainable Jobs in Industrial Countries," Lester R. Brown, et. al., *The State of the World 1992* (London: Earthscan, 1992), p. 138.

most environmentalism in the U.S., the unimaginative business union response of organized labor, and the divide and conquer strategy employed by timber capital and its allies within the Federal government against its two most powerful opponents — the working class and the environmentalists — have thus far combined to block the formation of any such coalition.

To be sure, the terrain of struggle now seems to be shifting against the large timber interests. The election at the national level of a Democratic administration that has promised to place greater emphasis on the needs of both labor and the environment in this crisis may make the formation of a labor-environmentalist alliance more feasible.

Nevertheless, a just and sustainable solution to the old growth crisis will not be imposed from above, only from below. Consequently, the forging of a popular coalition between workers and environmentalists to counterbalance the enormous influence that the large forest product corporations are able to exert over the state is more necessary now than ever. To understand how a united front between forest product workers and forest ecosystem defenders might actually be established under these circumstances, through which an alternative project of "ecological conversion" that does not place the main burden of adjustment on workers might be implemented, it is necessary to explore the present ecological and economic malaise in its making, with particular attention to the role of capital and the state.⁵ Such an account should reveal the class origins of the ecological crisis, together with the general outlines of a progressive class-based response to the stranglehold that the jobs vs. nature issue now maintains over the entire environmental movement.

2. Ecological Catastrophe and Social Crisis

At the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition the ancient conifer forest, dominated by trees hundreds of feet in height and centuries — sometimes more than a millennium — old covered some 20 million acres in western Oregon and western Washington alone. Today only around 12 percent or 2.4 million acres of actual "old growth forest" remains — consisting of centuries-old trees, a multilayered canopy,

⁵ On the concept of "ecological conversion," see Victor Wallis, "Socialism, Ecology and Democracy," *Monthly Review*, 44, 2, June, 1992.

numerous large dead standing trees or "snags" and large downed trees on the ground and across streams — according to the most advanced old growth inventory available from Peter Morrison of the Wilderness Society. Since private capital has cleared its land of nearly all of the original forest, the ancient forest that is left is to be found almost exclusively on public lands. Moreover, these last stands of late successional forest are largely confined to the higher elevations (above 2,500 feet) and are to be found in a crazy quilt of isolated patches — the result of previous logging, road building, and land clearances. According to data released in June, 1992 by NASA scientist Dr. Compton J. Tucker, who has led a project comparing satellite photos of the Pacific Northwest and Amazon forests, the Northwest forest has been subject to "severe fragmentation" and "has been literally cut to pieces." "When you compare the situation in the Pacific Northwest to the Amazon of Brazil [in this respect], the Northwest is much worse." Biologists have drawn an analogy between the Northwest forests and a shirt perforated again and again, to the point that there are now more holes than cloth. About 800,000 acres of the remaining intact old growth forest, according to the Morrison estimates, are currently protected in parks and wilderness areas. The other 1,600,000 acres — more than half of which are already highly fragmented — are open to exploitation. In the 1980s, these stands of old growth forest were disappearing at a rate of perhaps as much as 70,000 acres a year. If the recent rate of cutting were to continue, the unprotected regions of the old growth forest in Oregon and Washington would be gone in less than 30 years.⁶

⁶ Peter Morrison, in Joint Hearings, Subcommittee on Forests, Family Farms, and Energy of the Committee on Agriculture, and the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Congress, 101st Congress, First Session, *Management of Old-Growth Forests of the Pacific Northwest*, June 20 and 22, 1989, pp. 270-78; *Portland Oregonian*, October 15, 1990; Tucker, quoted in *New York Times*, June 11, 1992. The Peter Morrison/Wilderness Society estimate, based on the analysis of satellite pictures, takes account of the extreme fragmentation of these forests. Other estimates, including some by the Wilderness Society, that are broader and less rigorous in their methodology, have placed the remaining old growth forest acreage as high as 4.7 million acres or more (World Resources Institute, *The 1992 Information Please Environmental Almanac* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992], pp. 143-45). The figures on protected old growth forest acreage provided above do not include the habitat conservation areas for the northern spotted owl, that are currently under dispute.

It was under these general conditions that two opposing forces converged in the 1980s to form a highly volatile situation with respect to the management of the old growth forest. The first of these was evident in the implementation of a process of economic restructuring, arising out of the economic stagnation of the early 1980s, that required the ever more rapid liquidation of the old growth forest, together with increased exploitation of forest products workers. Responding to a decline in the secular growth trend of the economy, capital in the Reagan period attempted to restructure the economy and state in ways that would remove any regulatory limits that had been placed on free-market exploitation of the natural and human "conditions of production."⁷ As we will see, in the case of the Northwest national forests, this meant a subversion of the long-established principle of sustained yield insofar as this could be interpreted as a "non-declining even flow" of timber, and its replacement by a policy of increased cutting and rapid old growth liquidation designed to maximize government revenues, bridge the gap in private timber supplies, and clear the ground for a "fully managed" system of plantation forestry in the national forests.

The second converging force took the form of a rapidly growing environmental movement determined to defend the ecological integrity of the Northwest forests. In the face of a stepped-up campaign of forest restructuring aimed at the liquidation of the remaining old growth, environmentalists in the 1980s struck back with every means at their disposal: blockading logging roads with their bodies, tree sitting, and filing a flood of legal proceedings designed to slow down and eventually halt the removal of ancient timber. A crucial turning point in the struggle came in 1988 when a Federal court in Seattle upheld an environmentalist lawsuit claiming that the Federal government had violated the requirements of the Endangered Species Act in failing to take steps to preserve the habitat of the northern spotted owl, a rodent-eating predator high up on the old growth forest's food chain.

Environmentalists were aided not only by strong environmental law — the Endangered Species Act — but also by a series of scientific advances in the ecological understanding of the old growth forest that strongly reinforced the case for preservation. With the release of the

⁷ For the larger theoretical significance of this see, James O'Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction," *CNS*, 1, Fall, 1988.

landmark 1981 study, *Ecological Characteristics of the Old-Growth Douglas-Fir Forests*, authored by Forest Service ecologist, Jerry Franklin, and his associates, together with other related studies, it was demonstrated that the late successional or old growth forest was by far the richest and most ecologically complex stage in the forest's existence, supporting a yet uncataloged diversity of life forms, many of which are now endangered as a result of forest fragmentation and destruction of critical habitat. Individual stands within the old growth forest were discovered to be "unrivaled both in the size and longevity of individual trees and in the accumulation of biomass of individual stands." Among the coastal redwoods the old growth coniferous forest was found to exceed that of any tropical rainforest thus far measured in total accumulated biomass per unit area by a ratio of seven to one, while forests throughout the old growth coniferous region were found to support biomasses far beyond those of tropical forests (though the latter are unrivaled in the sheer diversity of life that they support). Moreover, it was revealed that the old growth forest stored more carbon per unit area than any other terrestrial ecosystem thus far measured, making it a significant factor in the stabilization of the world's climatic in the face of global warming. These and other new discoveries thus represented a scientific advance in forest ecology that seemed to point inexorably to the imperative of preservation.⁸ Environmentalists became adept at disseminating this new ecological understanding — much of it the product of the work of government scientists, some of whom were drawn into the controversy as it unfolded — to an ever larger public through an impressive outpouring of critical articles, books, and videos. Biologists thus obtained the enmity of those determined to maintain high levels of cutting in the Northwest national forests. Yet, charged by the Endangered Species Act with evaluating the chances for preservation of the critical habitat necessary to maintain a threatened species, government scientists in study after study continued to confirm the dire threat to the northern spotted owl, and indeed to the entire Northwest forest, reinforcing the

⁸ R. H. Waring and J. F. Franklin, "Evergreen Coniferous Forests of the Pacific Northwest," *Science*, 204, 1979; Elliot A. Norse, *Ancient Forests of the Pacific Northwest* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1990), pp. 20-24, 27-32, 141-44; Catherine Caufield, "The Ancient Forest," *The New Yorker*, May 14, 1990, pp. 46-49; David Kelly and Gary Braasch, *Secrets of the Old Growth Forest* (Salt Lake City, Peregrine Smith Books, 1988), pp. 21, 36-37, 63; Chris Maser, *The Redesignated Forest* (San Pedro, CA.: R & E Miles, 1988), p. 53.

environmentalist argument.

The convergence of these opposing economic and ecological forces in the early 1980s therefore signaled the emergence of contradictory conditions of the kind that Carolyn Merchant has associated with "ecological revolutions." These are characterized by "widening tensions between the requirements of ecology and production in a given habitat and between production and reproduction."⁹ As it became clear that the very existence of the ancient forest ecosystem was in danger, environmentalists, scientists caught up in the dispute, the judicial arm of the state (under the pressure of the Endangered Species Act), and certain sections of the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service bureaucracies came to identify with "the requirements of ecological reproduction" while the forces of capital and the command posts of the state (mainly within the topmost echelons of the Federal executive) leaned toward the interests of production. The result was a widening ecological and class war as capital stepped up its efforts to exploit the old growth forest, environmentalists responded on behalf of the forest, and the workers, caught in the middle, struggled to defend their economic livelihoods.

In April, 1990, a scientific study carried out in conformity with the Endangered Species Act by an inter-agency panel of government biologists, and known as the Jack Ward Thomas report after the panel's chair, proposed setting aside more than five million acres of Federal timberland in the form of "habitat conservation areas" to protect the northern spotted owl. If implemented this would effectively double the amount of protected lands in the public forests of Washington, Oregon, and northern California, and would lead to an almost 50 percent drop in annual Federal timber sales from the region. But even if this habitat conservation plan were fully adhered to, according to the biologists who prepared the report, the northern spotted owl's population would plummet by as much as one-half from its current level of about 3,000 pairs over the next several decades.

It is important to stress that since the remaining old growth acreage is not only limited but exists only in the form of scattered patches, the preservation of the owl habitat depends almost as much on

⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), p. 5.

the preservation of numerous "corridors" linking areas of widely dispersed old growth forest (often occurring in a checkerboard pattern) as on the protection of the intact old growth forest itself. Moreover, environmentalists have naturally struggled to preserve those acres of forest land that, while not conforming to the strictest definition of old growth — usually because the ecology had been damaged in some way — nevertheless embody a wealth of biological values, including the capacity to help support owl and other endangered species populations. Finally, in practice the issue has often boiled down to where to draw the lines on the map, raising practical, jurisdictional issues related to the extent and usage of various sections of the national forests. The battle to preserve the ancient forest in Washington, Oregon, and California therefore involved from the very start several times the area represented by the 2.4 million acres in Washington and Oregon that, according to the Morrison estimates, could be classified as fully intact old growth forest. Environmentalists, in fact, tended to view the Jack Ward Thomas plan — despite its commitment to setting aside more than 5 million acres — as inadequate for the preservation of the old growth forest ecosystem, since this plan had envisioned a further drastic decline in northern spotted owl populations over the ensuing decades.

The Jack Ward Thomas plan, the Forest Service estimated, would lead to the loss of 28,000 timber jobs over the next decade. Meanwhile, industry estimates placed the number of jobs to be lost due to the direct and indirect effects of the Thomas plan at more than 100,000. Soon the northern spotted owl was on the cover of *Time* magazine — under the sardonic heading "Who Gives a Hoot?"

Under pressure from the law, the environmentalists and the courts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, acting on the results of the Thomas report, officially listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in June, 1990. From that point on the crisis only seemed to intensify. In April, 1991, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that it would evaluate up to 11.6 million acres in Washington, Oregon, and northern California for possible protection to preserve the habitat of the northern spotted owl. Over the course of the following year, while court injunctions effectively banned most logging in the old growth forests pending the adoption of plans in conformity with the Endangered Species Act, the number of acres under consideration for protection dropped from 11.6 to 8 to 7 million acres; and when the Fish and Wildlife Service

unveiled its final recovery plan for the owl in May, 1992, the amount of critical habitat to be protected had been reduced to 5.4 million acres — approximately equal to the Jack Ward Thomas plan — with projected job losses at 32,000. In contrast to the Thomas plan, however, the recovery plan estimated the loss of less than one quarter of the total owl population, with the expectation that the remaining habitat would support 2,300 pairs of owls in comparison to the present 3,000. Moreover, the multidisciplinary scientific team responsible for the recovery plan presented a fairly optimistic scenario suggesting that the owl population would be sufficiently large and well-dispersed for the owl to survive, replenish its numbers, and, at some point, be removed from the threatened species list.

Still, in the view of the Bush administration, the recovery plan provided by the Fish and Wildlife Service in conformity with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act — although a necessary step in getting the courts to allow a resumption of logging in the Northwest national forests — was not acceptable. The idea was to undermine it from the outset, as part of a larger campaign against the Endangered Species Act itself. Secretary of the Interior Lujan had publicly voiced the opinion that, "Maybe we should change the [Endangered Species] law....The spotted owl business is probably the prime example." The first major thrust in the Bush administration counterattack, dubbed an "Act of God" by the Southern Forest Products Association, was to convene in 1992 (for only the third time in its history) the Endangered Species Committee, commonly known as the God Squad because of its power to override species preservation on the grounds of economic necessity. The second major thrust was to release a separate Interior Department plan at the same time as the Fish and Wildlife Service recovery plan — with the express purpose of undermining the latter.¹⁰

The God Squad's membership, as set out in the Endangered Species Act, includes the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, and Army, the heads of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, the Environmental Protection Agency, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (all of whom are Presidential appointees), and a representative from each affected State (in this case Oregon). On

¹⁰ Lujan quoted in Jonathon King, *Northwest Greenbook* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1991), p. 53; Southern Forest Products Association, *Newsletter*, October 7, 1991.

this occasion, the God Squad had been convened at a Bureau of Land Management request to decide on whether to override the Endangered Species Act in the case of 44 sales of BLM timber. As reported in the *Portland Oregonian* (May 17, 1992), "The God Squad met...in the Interior Secretary's small, wood-paneled ceremonial conference room. Access was tightly restricted, but Lujan's staff reserved 10 seats for 'constituents.' All 10 were filled by representatives of the timber industry, labor unions and timber communities."

The result was as expected. In a largely symbolic attack, the main effect of which was to throw doubt on the Endangered Species Act, the God Squad voted 5-2 (the head of the EPA, William Reilly, and the Oregon representative dissenting) in May, 1992 to exempt 13 Bureau of Land Management timber sales from the requirements of the Act.

Immediately following the God Squad vote, Lujan released both the recovery plan mandated by the Endangered Species Act and the rival Interior Department plan promoted by Lujan himself. In the Lujan plan, prepared by a small team of Interior Department officials that included no biologists, the area to be protected would be slashed by nearly one-half (to only 2.8 million acres), reducing the number of habitat conservation areas from 196 to 75, while the surviving owl population, as estimated by the plan, would decrease to a maximum of 1,500 breeding pairs out of the 3,000 pairs now existing. According to Lujan, this Interior Department plan would result in the loss of only 15,000 jobs. However, since the Lujan plan would fail to protect the threatened species throughout its range, it represented a clear break with the provisions of the Endangered Species Act, and would require special Congressional legislation to be put into effect. Environmentalists immediately labeled the Lujan proposal an "extinction plan." Further, those who saw the Interior Department plan in these terms included scientists responsible for the preparation of the Thomas and recovery plans. In the cautious estimation of Jonathon Bart, who headed the government's multidisciplinary recovery plan team, the Lujan plan by providing insufficient habitat would "eventually result in extinction" over many decades of the northern spotted owl.

Confident that the wind was changing in their direction, supporters of the timber industry greeted the Lujan plan with only a lukewarm response. Although some timber industry representatives

declared that the Interior Department plan was a "step in the right direction," other defenders of the Northwest industry, such as Republican Senator Bob Packwood from Oregon, refused to support even the Lujan plan on the grounds that it would eliminate too many jobs, claiming, "It comes down to this: Are you for people or for the bird?" Others declared that even the 75 conservation areas to be set up in the Lujan plan were unnecessary, on the spurious grounds that the owl could survive in second growth forest.¹¹

For many, however, the virulence of the Bush administration's assault on environmental legislation, the northern spotted owl, and the old growth forest no doubt came as a considerable surprise. Indeed, what has made the nature of the ancient forest crisis so mysterious from the beginning has been the tendency for most establishment discussions to focus in fetishized fashion on timber, owls, loggers and environmentalists while ignoring the major historical agent of change: capital itself including the capital-state partnership ("a *partnership* between two different separate forces, linked to each other by many threads, yet each having its own separate sphere of concern").¹²

From the beginning, the giant forest products firms deliberately stayed behind the scenes, leaving the defense of their interests to their major political lobbying organizations, the American Forest Resource Alliance and the National Forest Products Association. Meanwhile, few mainstream commentators have thought it worth their while to explore the historical dimensions of this ecological catastrophe brought on by the accumulation of timber capital. The public is thus left with the distinct impression that the whole problem can be reduced to an irreconcilable conflict between workers and environmentalists, between owls and jobs — a conflict in which the state is presumably neutral and capital is notable mainly by its absence. It is this great silence with respect to timber capital's historic role, including its partnership with what might be termed the "natural resource state," that must be penetrated if a realistic understanding of the fate of the forest is to emerge.¹³

¹¹ *Eugene Register-Guard*, May 15 and 24, 1992; *Portland Oregonian*, May 15 and 17, 1992.

¹² Ralph Milliband, *Divided Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 30-4.

¹³ For the notion of the "natural resource state" organized in the U.S. around the Department of Interior in particular, see Christopher Manes, *Green Rage* (Boston: Little

3. Monopoly Capital and Environmental Degradation: The Case of the Forest

Most forest land in the United States is privately owned. The largest part belongs to farmers, ranchers, and small owners, while a handful of giant timber corporations, owning only a small portion of the whole, but in control of vast tree plantations in the most productive tree-growing regions in the Southeast and the Northwest, dominate timber production nationwide. These "even-aged industrial plantations" with their monocultures of pine and fir have been dubbed "forestry's equivalent to the urban tower block."¹⁴

Such concentrated control of the conditions governing the production and marketing of timber by a relatively small number of firms at the apex of the industry, Veblen argued early in the twentieth century, emerged in accordance with "the characteristic traits of the American plan [of natural resource exploitation] — initial waste and eventual absentee ownership on a large scale and quasi-monopolistic footing." In the Northwest, the giant private forest holdings were formed during the monopolistic drive at the turn of the century, with the largest tracts emerging from railroad property. In 1900, the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company came into being when the Northern Pacific Railroad sold 900,000 acres of virgin timberland to a group of midwestern logging entrepreneurs headed by Frederick Weyerhaeuser. Today six companies, led by Weyerhaeuser, own more than seven million acres of forest in the Northwest. As a result, these firms are able to dominate the entire forest product industry in the region — from the growing and harvesting of trees, to the operation of lumber and plywood mills and pulp and paper factories, to the marketing of the final products. Smaller forest product companies, lacking significant private forest lands of their own, must rely almost entirely on access to public timber to feed their mills.¹⁵

Brown and Co., 1990).

¹⁴ Edward Goldsmith, et. al., *The Imperilled Planet* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 94; Richard E. Rice, "Old-Growth Logging Myths," *The Ecologist*, 20, 4, July-August 1990, pp. 143-45.

¹⁵ Spider Burbank, et. al., *A Study of the Weyerhaeuser Company as a Multinational Corporation* (The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA., June 1975), p. 1; Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times* (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1923), p. 194.

From the beginning, the power of the large timber firms depended on their ability to limit competition and prevent prices from falling by keeping an oversupply of timber from reaching the market. By the late 1920s, however, the Northwest timber industry was experiencing a serious glut of supply, followed by a depression in 1929. Timber capital therefore encouraged the Federal government to add tens of billions of additional board feet of "standing timber" to the national forests (150 billion board feet [bbf] were added in 1933 alone) to be harvested, in contrast to the more rapid rate of cutting on private lands, only on a sustained-yield basis. In this way, the major corporations were able to achieve the following three objectives: (1) limiting the supply of timber on the market; (2) maintaining higher prices for their own timber; and (3) establishing timber community stability (hence the existence of a readily exploitable labor force) in what were essentially company towns.

With the coming of the Second World War, market conditions changed and total national timber production leaped up from a low of 17 bbf in 1933 to 36 bbf in 1941. Timber production continued to climb after the Second World War as a result of pent-up demand for housing and programs such as VA mortgages. It was the Korean War boom, however, that produced the peak in private timber harvests in the Northwest. In 1952, corporations removed enough board feet from private lands in Oregon alone to "house the state's entire two million population together with San Francisco's 700,000 residents." From this point on, private timber harvests declined sharply. Yet corporations continued to cut trees at a frenetic pace, and were slow to replant prior to the 1960s. As a result timber companies and homebuilders began to demand more intensive harvesting of high value old growth on public timberlands to compensate for the shortages in private supplies. Annual removals of national forest timber rose from 3 bbf in 1945 to 13 bbf in 1970. Yet, this was not enough for the corporations. In 1970, a Nixon administration task force, bowing to pressures from industry, wrote that, "A goal of about 7 billion board foot annual increase in timber harvest from the national forests by 1978 is believed to be attainable and consistent with other objectives of forest management."¹⁶ By the

¹⁶ David A. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), pp. 80-93, 110-11; William B. Greeley, *Forests and Men* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1951), p. 206; Con H. Schallau, "Sustained Yield versus Community Stability," *Journal of Forestry*, 87, 9, September 1989, p. 18; Keith Ervin, *Fragile Majesty* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1989), p. 123; Daniel R. Barney, *The Last*

1980s, this "mining" of ancient timber had produced a sharpened contradiction between ecological and economic requirements. On the one hand, an environmental movement grew by leaps and bounds as a result of growing concern over the vanishing forest, reinforced by a more sophisticated scientific understanding of the late successional forest ecosystem. On the other hand, conditions of economic stagnation in the late 1970s and 1980s — reflected in a drop in housing starts from two million in 1976 to one million in 1982 — put renewed pressure on capital to restructure its relation to both labor and the environment, speeding up its exploitation of both.

In this developing contradiction, it was the immediate economic imperative that initially had the upper hand. During the Reagan years, increased sales of national forest timber were seen as a means of lowering lumber prices and overcoming a severe slump in housing. At the same time, the pull of the world market was exerting increased pressure on U.S. timber supplies. More and more timber was finding its way abroad in the form of unprocessed logs destined mainly for Asia, where the current selling price for logs is up to 50 percent higher than in the United States. In 1987, three bbf of logs were exported from U.S. Pacific ports to Pacific Rim countries — almost 70 percent to Japan alone. By 1988 this amount had reached four bbf (equivalent to about 60 percent of the total harvest from federal lands in Oregon and Washington). Meanwhile, U.S. imports of Canadian lumber between 1975 and 1985 rose from less than one-fifth to one-third of U.S. softwood lumber consumption.¹⁷ Although the government prohibits the export of logs from Federal forests, the mere fact that logs from private lands are being shipped in large quantities abroad means that the overall demand for timber is increased and local sawmills are forced to rely more and more on public timber from the old growth forests for their supplies.

¹⁷ U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, *Production, Prices, Employment and Trade in Northwest Forest Industries*, various issues; Marcus Widenor, "Pattern Bargaining in the Pacific Northwest Sawmill Industry: 1980-1989," in Steven Hecker and Margaret Hallock, ed. *Labor in a Global Economy* (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon, Labor Education and Research Center, 1991); Widman Management Limited, *Markets 89-93: The Outlook for North American Forest Products* (San Francisco: Widman Management, 1989), pp. 79, 107.

Eager to exploit growing world demand for logs and at the same time force down U.S. lumber prices, the Reagan administration pursued every means at its disposal to accelerate Federal timber harvests. The man appointed to accomplish this as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and the Environment (hence the boss of the Forest Service), was John Crowell, Jr., formerly general counsel for Louisiana-Pacific, the largest purchaser of Federal timber. No sooner was his appointment confirmed than Crowell proposed a doubling of the rate of harvest from Federal forest lands in Oregon and Washington, from an annual rate of 5 bbf to 10 bbf by the 1990s. Since this rate of cutting was far beyond what could be regarded as sustained yield, it was immediately apparent that Crowell stood for the quickest possible liquidation of the remaining stands of ancient forest. The chief barrier to "more efficient National Forest management," Crowell claimed, "has been the timber policy of 'non-declining even flow' The volume of wood present in these old growth forests far exceeds what would be present as growing stock inventory once the forest is in a fully managed condition."¹⁸ Or as he stated more succinctly elsewhere, "If you cut the old growth you're liquidating the existing inventory and getting the forests into a fully managed condition."¹⁹

The entire Reagan strategy of increased exploitation of the U.S. national forests — it is crucial to understand — depended on a vastly accelerated rate of cutting in the Northwest in particular since it was

¹⁸ John Crowell, "Excerpts from a Speech by John B. Crowell, Jr.," in Bureau of Governmental Research and Service, University of Oregon, *Old Growth Forests: A Balanced Perspective* (University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 1982), pp. 133-36.

¹⁹ Quoted in *Portland Oregonian*, October 15, 1990. Crowell's position, while extreme, reflects the dominant Forest Service/timber industry view that a steady or even accelerated cutting of old growth in the national forests is necessary to close the "window" of a temporary shortage of timber, brought on in the last few decades by past failures of forest management and the slow growth of trees in the Northwest. This window, it is believed, will be closed in the first quarter of the twenty-first century when enough second growth timber will be available to sustain production indefinitely — a point that will be reached, however, only when all of the old growth in the national forests has been removed and the entire timber economy had been put on a fully commodified, tree-plantation basis. In Federal forest management this approach is justified as broadly consistent with "sustained yield" forestry. In practice, however, it has little to with sustainability in either ecological or economic terms, and has become little more than an additional rationale for pursuing timber capital's age-old policy of cutting as much timber as the market will bear.

from these national forests that the great bulk of the net proceeds from Federal timber sales were obtained, although most Federal timber placed on the market came from forests in other parts of the country. In 1987, 90 percent of the net receipts from Forest Service timber sales came from the 12 Northwest forests, which nevertheless accounted for only one third of the timber harvested from U.S. national forests that year.²⁰ Costs associated with timber sales (road building, etc.) depend on the area sold, but revenue depends on the volume of timber sold as well as wood quality. Both volume/area and quality are very high in the Northwest old growth forests, which make them by far the most profitable area of U.S. Forest Service operations. Profit criteria therefore demanded higher rates of cutting in these forests. And since almost everywhere else in the U.S. the Forest Service was, in fact, selling timber at a complete loss, continued sales of high value old growth timber in the Northwest were essential to keep the overall timber sales budget in the black and thus to prevent enormous losses elsewhere — and hence the full extent of the Federal timber subsidy to capital — from becoming visible.

But in order to carry out its plan of increasing sales and harvest levels in the Northwest national forests, dictated by all of these factors, the Reagan administration found it first necessary to deal with the crisis in the timber industry brought on by the depression in the national homebuilding market, which had been badly hit by the effects of skyrocketing interest rates in the early Reagan era. And this meant lowering the price charged to timber companies for Federal timber from the Northwest still further. Contract arrangements for Federal timber have traditionally allowed firms to purchase cutting rights for standing timber and to delay harvesting for two to five years until market conditions were favorable — a policy that has encouraged widespread speculation. The housing crash of 1982 thus left timber firms sitting on vast inventories of Federal timber which were now overpriced in relation to depressed domestic lumber prices. Through the timber contract bailout of 1984, signed into law by President Reagan, the Federal government made it possible for firms to profit from this situation by releasing them from contracts for billions of board feet of uncut timber and then reselling the same trees back again to the companies at bargain-basement, recession-level prices. Profits soared as corporations and Northwest members of Congress forced the

²⁰ Caulfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

sale of high volumes of low cost Federal timber (with both sales and harvests reaching near record levels) throughout the remainder of the 1980s and in the first year of the following decade.²¹

Meanwhile internal Bureau of Land Management plans in 1983 to trim cutting and introduce longer rotation times in the forests in western Oregon under its jurisdiction, in the face of dwindling agency timber supplies, were suddenly scotched late that same year (some of those involved believe by the BLM's parent agency, the Interior Department then headed by James Watt) and timber harvests were instead increased. Thus it comes as no surprise that internal BLM memos made public in 1990 warn that the agency has been harvesting at unsustainable levels and is running out of trees to cut. "In some cases there is no place to go after 1991," one internal memo observed.²²

Equally disastrous from the standpoint of sustainability was the adoption beginning in 1984 of Federal subsidies for private log exports — under rules pertaining to a wide variety of export commodities — which allowed timber firms with foreign-based sales operations (i.e., multinationals) to obtain tax exemptions of 15 to 30 percent of their export income. By 1992, this was costing the U.S. Treasury \$100 million a year in lost revenue. According to Congressional Representative Les AuCoin (D-OR), Plum Creek Timber (formerly Burlington Northern) used these subsidies for log exports to export in effect over 5,000 U.S. forest product jobs in the 1980s, while pocketing \$33 million in tax savings.²³

4. Ecological Conflict and the Class Struggle

The first real sign that the traditional rather peaceful give and take over U.S. forest lands between accumulation and conservation had been radically transformed by the 1980s in ways that suggested the emergence of an era of confrontation occurred in April, 1983, when four Earth Firsters appeared out of nowhere in the Siskiyou National Forest in Oregon and took their stand between a running bulldozer and

²¹ Joe P. Mauty, *The Timber Bubble that Burst* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 3-9; *Portland Oregonian*, October 15, 1990.

²² *Eugene Register-Guard*, May 24, 1992.

²³ *Eugene Register-Guard*, October 26, 1992.

a tree. Before long radical environmentalists were sitting on company dynamite to prevent blasting, tree spiking (driving large nails into trees in order to hinder the cutting and processing of timber), tree sitting, chaining themselves to timber equipment, and forming human barricades on logging roads by setting their feet in cement-filled ditches or inserting themselves in rock piles.²⁴

While Earth Firsters chose a path of direct confrontation, other environmental groups relied on legal action. Soon Federal agencies found themselves immersed in a flood of lawsuits and administrative appeals. In 1987, 25 environmental groups filed the first of three spotted owl lawsuits through the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, thus setting in motion the chain of events leading to the release of the Jack Ward Thomas report and the listing of the owl as threatened in the spring and summer of 1990.

For Northwest forest products workers these actions by environmentalists were naturally viewed with growing anguish. There can be no doubt that the impending "locking away" of millions of acres of public timberland spells disaster for tens of thousands of workers. Soon, frustration with what they saw as an extreme preservationist ethic was inducing many workers to display angry bumper stickers such as "I LOVE SPOTTED OWLS — FRIED" — often seen in timber areas of the Northwest. On a number of occasions, owls (not always northern spotted owls because they are hard to find) have been found killed and nailed to trees or road signs. One was discovered with its head placed in a noose.

Timber firms have generally sought to reinforce this rage of the workers against environmentalists, adding fuel to the fire at every possible opportunity, with sawmill owners actually sponsoring anti-preservationist lectures during working hours at the mills. More tragic, however, is the fact that environmentalists are themselves responsible for needlessly provoking much of this rage through the gross

insensitivity with which they have frequently greeted the plight of the workers. For example, the Native Forest Council — well known throughout the Northwest for its radical environmentalist publication *Forest Voice* — has argued that the problem of workers threatened by displacement can be left to the condign sanctions of the market:

A market economy does not maintain an industry simply for the sake of employing workers. When a product becomes obsolete or a resource runs dry, the economy adapts. Companies and industries have been changing or shutting down for 200 years, and workers always find new jobs — the nation is not lacking in jobs; it's a natural, necessary component of capitalism. Chopping down forests for the sake of jobs is nothing more than social welfare — not something our nation prides itself on.²⁵

Such unsympathetic attitudes toward workers, while rarely as crude as the above example, are not unusual even among those militant environmentalists who purport to be on the side of the workers in the class struggle. This can be seen in a position recently taken by Dave Foreman, Co-Founder of Earth First!:

One of my biggest complaints about the workers up in the Pacific Northwest is that most of them aren't 'class conscious.' That's a big problem....The loggers are victims of an unjust economic system, yes, but that should not absolve them for everything they do....Indeed, sometimes it is the hardy swain, the sturdy yeoman from the bumpkin proletariat so celebrated in Wobbly lore who holds the most violent and destructive attitudes towards the natural world (and toward those who would defend it).²⁶

Despite the radical rhetoric, there can be no doubt that Foreman exhibits an extremely condescending attitude here toward workers (the so-called "bumpkin proletariat") and their efforts to maintain their

²⁴ Manes, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-15, 86-88, 99-102, 210-11. Tree spiking is extremely controversial since it is life threatening to workers, who can be injured or killed when saw blades come into contact with the spike. Since March, 1990, when Judi Bari publicly denounced tree spiking at an Oregon conference at the urging of timber worker Gene Lawhorn, Earth Firsters in the Northwest have repeatedly repudiated this tactic. See Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors* (Chicago: The Noble Press, 1990), pp. 74-78, 83; Clay Dumont, *Loggers and Radical Environmentalists: Cultural Struggles in Timber Country* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1991), pp. 79-84, 135-137.

²⁵ Native Forest Council, *Forest Voice*, II, 2, 1990, p. 5. See also Dumont, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-91.

²⁶ Dave Foreman in Steve Chase, ed., *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), pp. 51-52. Not all within Earth First! would agree with Foreman's point of view. Judi Bari is the most famous of those Earth Firsters who have adopted a labor-environmentalist stance. On Bari's ideas and position within the movement, see Scarce, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-85.

economic livelihoods. It is surely inadequate to say that environmentalists are not costing the workers their jobs when these jobs are being threatened as a result of environmentalist actions, with environmentalists doing very little directly to aid the workers caught in this situation. It is equally objectionable to complain about lack of "class consciousness" and an absence of resistance among workers while turning a blind eye to the concrete struggles actually taking place. Nor should one be overly hasty to condemn forest product workers, the majority of whom believe in promoting a sustainable relation to the forest at some level, for adhering to destructive attitudes toward the natural world.

Not just deep ecologists but also mainstream environmental groups commonly distance themselves from workers. Less inclined to adopt the language of class, the latter seldom express their disdain for workers as openly, but their "that's not our problem" attitude — not to speak of their interlocking directorates with major corporations and their white, upper-middle class membership base — suggest many of the same biases.²⁷

The disdain with which environmentalist groups commonly greet workers in the timber industry is most evident in the general silence in environmental circles regarding the fierce battle that is still being waged between employers and employees in and around the Northwest forests. In the 1980s, forest product workers in the Northwest were hit by a number of major market conditions that seriously undermined their economic positions and their capacity to engage in effective class struggles. These included: (1) a drastic drop in housing starts; (2) increased exports of unprocessed logs coupled with rising excess capacity in Northwest mills; (3) a vastly stepped up rate of imports of lumber from Canada (which had the effect of creating deep fissures between Canadian and U.S. workers within the International

²⁷ To be sure, where attempts have been made by environmental organizations to ally themselves with forest product workers, as in Washington State, the media have shown little interest in drawing attention to the fact. In the words of Hazel Wolf, "As Secretary of the Seattle Audubon Society, I have attended joint environmental-labor press conferences that were poorly attended by the press and consequently ignored by the media. This is a story that is all too familiar and accounts for the success of the timber industry in driving a wedge between the environmentalists and loggers using the myth of jobs vs. owls" (Hazel Wolf, "Relief for Unemployed Forest Workers," *Monthly Review*, 43, 9, February, 1992, pp. 46-47).

Woodworkers of America); (4) rapid declines in employment due to mechanization; (5) wage competition from Southern woodworkers (who earned almost \$3 an hour less on average in 1986 than their Northwest counterparts); and (6) a general shift of the industry from the Northwest to the Southeast, where faster growing pine plantations and right to work laws provide a greater "comparative advantage" in timber production.

Of all of these factors affecting Northwest timber employment, automation has probably been the most important. In 1987, it took only eight workers to process one million board feet of timber, compared to 10 workers a decade earlier. In 1976, a total of 15 bbf of timber was harvested from all sources in Oregon and Washington, giving employment to 150,900 workers in the lumber and wood products and paper and allied products industries. In 1989, the same total harvest level employed 135,700 or about 10 percent fewer workers. In Oregon, the state with the largest old growth forests, employment in the lumber and wood products industries declined by 21.9 percent between 1978 and 1990, with 71 percent of this decline occurring between 1978 and 1988, before the northern spotted owl became a major issue.

Not surprisingly, capital chose this period to launch a wider class offensive. In 1983 Louisiana-Pacific demanded eight to 10 percent rollbacks and the creation of a two-tier wage structure at its 15 Northwest mills, forcing the unions to strike. With no agreement after a year, the union locals at Louisiana-Pacific's mills were decertified. In 1985, Weyerhaeuser demanded wage and benefit cuts of about \$4 an hour at a number of mills. When the unions resisted the mills were closed. Having demonstrated its clout, Weyerhaeuser in 1986 was able to force an agreement with the unions that involved wage and benefit cuts of \$4 an hour plus the implementation of a complex "profit-sharing" scheme. Although strikes continued to break out at Northwest mills in the late 1980s, it was clear that the unions had suffered a great reversal in their class war with capital.²⁸

During these fierce battles between forest products firms and their workers, environmentalists were nowhere to be seen, and scarcely seemed to notice. Few in the green movement saw this as an occasion to demonstrate their solidarity with workers. Indeed, environmentalists

²⁸ Renner, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-51; U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Center, *op. cit.*; *Eugene Register-Guard*, May 3, 1991; Widenor, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-61.

sometimes seem to go out of their way to separate themselves from workers.²⁹

The political and organizational consequences of this environmentalism without class, separating environmentalists from workers, is particularly evident at the grassroots in the Northwest. Today the conflict at the popular level in Oregon is visible more and more in terms of the opposition between two large coalitions: on the one side, the Oregon Natural Resources Council (ONRC), the most powerful regional environmental organization in the country, embracing some 6,000 members and representing some 80 different conservation groups; on the other side, the Oregon Lands Coalition (OLC), a predominantly conservative, pro-industry coalition, embracing over 72,000 members, and encompassing 47 different organizations. While the ONRC is closely tied through local chapters to such national conservation organizations as the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, and the National Wildlife Federation, the anti-environmentalist OLC has forged close links to Republican figures in the Northwest Congressional delegation and to the American Forest Resource Alliance — as well as more tenuous relations with AFL-CIO locals (tenuous because of the reputed anti-union orientation of some OLC member organizations, such as the pro-capital Yellow Ribbon Coalition).

The deep divisions that have emerged in this way between the labor and ecology movements explain much of the success of the Bush strategy in containing the environmentalist assault on the timber industry. Exploiting to the full the divisions among popular forces, the Bush administration early on adopted a strategy of staving off the separate threats represented by environmentalists and workers to the interests of capital through a policy of divide and conquer. Thus, on the one hand, George Bush announced that he was concerned above all with the jobs of workers threatened by efforts to protect the endangered spotted owl. "We want to save the little furry-feathery guy and all that but I don't want to see 40,000 loggers thrown out of work."³⁰ On the

²⁹ For example, in their popular ecological photo essay, David Kelly and Gary Braasch falsely glorify environmentalists as a nature-loving "bourgeoisie," which "donned backpacks *en masse* and headed for the hills, where they discovered the environment was in trouble" (Kelly and Braasch, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-59).

³⁰ Quoted in the *London Times*, May 28, 1992.

other hand, the administration has repeatedly let it be known that the President was opposed to special legislation designed to assist displaced workers.³¹

Despite the release of the Thomas report in April, 1990, and the listing of the northern spotted owl as a threatened species in June, 1990, the executive branch ordered the Forest Service in the spring and summer of 1990 to stop working on an owl protection plan. At the same time, the White House suppressed a Forest Service/BLM report on the northern spotted owl that had come up with numerous ways to offset the job losses experienced by workers. According to what Democratic Congressional Representative Peter DeFazio has called a "reliable source" in the Forest Service, the Forest Service/BLM study was killed by the administration. A May, 1990 draft of the suppressed report contained over 52 pages of concrete recommendations, including an \$86 million dollar public works program modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, bans on log exports "for all ownerships," increases in the share of revenues from timber sales to be returned to timber-dependent communities, extensive retraining programs, and money for road reclamation projects. Since this report pointed to the fact that a political solution to the crisis that would meet the needs of both environmentalists and workers was perfectly feasible, "someone in the White House....I'd lay even money on John Sununu," DeFazio said, simply killed the report.³²

Overall, the Bush administration was clearly on the defensive on the owl question from the spring of 1990 to the spring of 1992, when the Lujan plan was released. Its initial strategy was to encourage the main Federal agencies involved — the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service — to delay the adoption of plans to safeguard the northern spotted owl. Such delays would allow the timber companies to extract huge quantities of additional timber from the Northwest forest. For a year this delaying tactic seemed to work. But, beginning in April, 1991, the administration strategy collapsed as Federal courts (laying the blame on

³¹ On administration opposition to special assistance for the displaced workers, see *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 1991.

³² U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, *Actions the Administration May Wish to Consider in Implementing a Conservation Strategy for the Northern Spotted Owl*, unpublished, May 1, 1990; *Eugene Register-Guard*, May 4, 1991.

the Bush administration) ruled that the Federal agencies were not in compliance with the law, with the result that bans were placed on Forest Service (and, more recently, Bureau of Land Management) sales until agency plans to protect the owl were formulated and put into effect. From that point on, the Bush administration focused its efforts on the more aggressive strategy of undermining the long-awaited Fish and Wildlife Service recovery plan and the Endangered Species Act itself (which is now coming up for renewal) through the convening of the God Squad, and the launching of its own plan for slow extinction of the owl in the interests of greater timber extraction.

By Fall, 1992, the Bush administration was concentrating on circumventing the Endangered Species Act by means of Congressional legislation that would capitulate to timber interests. Upon the release of the Lujan plan, Senator Slade Gorton, Republican from Washington, announced that he intended to introduce it immediately in the form of legislation in the Senate, as the Bush administration addition to the group of bills presently under consideration in Congress in relation to the ancient forest. In this way, the spotted owl, the opponents of preservation hoped, would become simply another snail darter (to which it has frequently been compared). In that case, Congress overruled both the Endangered Species Act and the God Squad, ordering the completion of Tennessee's Tellico Dam that threatened the tiny fish. The greatest fear of environmentalists, meanwhile, is that the Endangered Species Act itself will be placed in jeopardy as an outgrowth of this continuing crisis. If timber capital and the natural resource state were to succeed through the manipulation of the "owls vs. jobs" issue in extracting the teeth from the Endangered Species Act, the disaster for the natural environment in the United States would extend far beyond the northern spotted owl or the ancient forest to species and habitats throughout the country.³³

However, by November, 1992, the immediate threat to environmentalist hopes seemed to be receding somewhat as a consequence of two new developments.

In October, 1992 the marbled murrelet, a tiny sea bird that nests in the old growth forests of Washington, Oregon and northern California, was listed as a threatened species. Although two-thirds of

³³ On the Endangered Species Act itself, see Kathryn A. Kohm, ed., *Balancing on the Brink of Extinction* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1991).

the murrelet's range is already under protection because of the northern spotted owl, the effect of this new listing means that certain coastal forest areas currently not included in the set asides for the owl will be affected. More important, environmentalists hope that the listing of a second species as "threatened" will remove attention from the owl and focus the controversy instead on the entire old growth ecosystem.

The second development was the election in November, 1992 of the Clinton-Gore administration, which had campaigned on the Pacific coast as a peacemaker in the timber wars, willing to distance itself from the large timber corporations and to stand for the interests of both workers and environmentalists. In the campaign Clinton argued strongly for the elimination of the subsidy for private log exports, declaring that this money could be better spent on worker retraining. According to Representative Peter DeFazio (D-OR), the new administration is in favor of an economic transition program that would retrain displaced workers, restore forests and watersheds, and boost the productivity of second growth forests.

For environmentalists the chief hope arising out of the election — voiced by Andy Kerr of the Oregon Natural Resources Council — is that a quick and definitive settlement of the owl question, through the enactment of an economic transition program under the auspices of the new administration, will defuse what is potentially the most explosive issue that could be used by opponents of the environmental movement to undermine the Endangered Species Act, when it comes up for reenactment in 1993.

The Oregon Lands Coalition (OLC) meanwhile is pinning its hopes on the new administration's promise to call a timber summit within the first 100 days after the election, which will give the OLC the opportunity to mobilize its forces on the public stage, and to generate a political momentum for a weakening of the Endangered Species Act.³⁴

5. Toward a Strategy of Ecological Conversion

If the foregoing analysis is correct and the environmentalist cause has been impeded by the executive arm of the state acting in

³⁴ *Eugene Register-Guard*, November 5, 1992; *Portland Oregonian*, November 1992; Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), pp. 121, 194.

tandem with the large corporations, while workers and endangered species are being forced to bear the main costs of the crisis, it would seem to be eminently sensible for environmentalists and workers to join forces around a common platform. A progressive class-oriented response to the old growth crisis would have to focus on an ecological conversion program that could be enacted at the level of the state. As Victor Wallis has argued, the term "conversion, has traditionally referred to the switch from a military to a civilian economy." But the concept can be applied more broadly to the socially planned redirection of the economy necessary to create a sustainable society.³⁵

There is no doubt that an ecological conversion strategy of this sort could be adopted in relation to the old growth forest crisis. Moreover, there are progressive, ecologically concerned voices within the worker's movement who would back such a strategy. This is illustrated by the position taken by William Street, a progressive policy analyst for the International Woodworkers of America (IWA). Writing in May, 1990 in his column in the IWA's paper, *The Woodworker*, Street explains:

We...know...a worker's forest policy....starts by recognizing the need for a sustainable and renewable forestry. It recognizes that each portion of the planet must produce its proportional share of the resources it uses. The proportion should be produced as environmentally sound as possible....A worker's forest policy would harvest at a sustainable rate and insure that those mature trees that are harvested are used for those socially desired products for which there are no substitutes. By thus restricting the use of older trees, harvest pressure would be diminished without contributing to unemployment.³⁶

This position taken by a progressive figure within a major forest product union does not represent a solution to the tragedy of the ancient forest, since it does not fully take into account the fragility of the remaining old growth forest. Yet, it represents a view that includes ecological and social components that are crucial to any attempt both to

³⁵ Wallis, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-18. See also Raymond Williams, "Socialism and Ecology" in *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989).

³⁶ William Street, "Ecology is Not a Four Letter Word," *The Woodworker*, May 20, 1990.

save the forest and safeguard the livelihoods of workers. It constitutes a viewpoint, moreover, that is a far cry from those that single-issue environmentalists almost invariably attribute to workers.

One thing that Street's "worker's forest policy" makes clear is that once the narrow profit-making goals of corporations are no longer seen as the primary constraint in working out solutions to problems of the environment and employment, all sorts of new rational possibilities open up, allowing for the development of common ground between workers and environmentalists. Clearcutting could conceivably be replaced by the "new forestry" techniques promoted by ecologist Jerry Franklin, in which the aim is to mimic natural processes by leaving behind large standing trees, snags, and fallen trees. Restrictions could be placed on the uses to which mature timber could be put — so that old growth could not be logged and then pulped to be converted into products like disposable diapers. Highgrading or the selective cutting of the oldest and most valuable timber alone could be prohibited. The use of herbicides and the burning of slash could be eliminated. Current bans on Federal log exports could be followed up by bans (or export duties) on private log exports. Early retirement programs could be designed for older workers in the industry, coupled with guaranteed annual employment programs for those in the smaller workforce that remains. Larger shares of forest revenues could be returned to local communities. A Civilian Conservation Corps could be established to construct recreation facilities and carry out ecological restoration projects in the forests. Roads could be reclaimed in habitat conservation areas. Conversion funds could be provided to convert old growth sawmills into more modern plants equipped to process second growth. A windfall profits tax could be placed on timber corporations that see the value of the timber on their tree plantations rise as a result of curtailments of public timber supplies. Extensive education and retraining programs (a worker's GI Bill) could be established for displaced forest product workers. Economic development grants and loans could be made available to distressed communities. Federal programs could be developed to help manage timber more effectively on non-industrial private forest lands. Current Federal timber contract practices could be altered to ensure that timber would be sold at its full value and to decrease speculative purchases. Federal subsidies to timber capital through road-building budgets could be sharply curtailed and the freed up funds redirected to social services in timber communities. Funds could be allocated for the expansion of national

forest lands to be managed on a non-profit, ecologically sustainable basis, with revenue from the land base being used to support working communities. Finally, international agreements could be promoted to establish uniform practices of sustainable forestry and to reduce global competitive pressures that encourage deforestation and forest fragmentation.

What is important to recognize is that only a few relatively minor steps in this general direction would go a long way toward solving the employment problem and community instability caused by the "set asides" for the protection of the northern spotted owl. A unified labor-environmentalist strategy that would meet the needs of both the forest ecosystem and forest communities is therefore perfectly feasible. What is necessary to make this possible is for society to invest some of its economic surplus in assisting workers whose jobs and communities are being undermined by new ecological requirements.

Unfortunately, people such as William Street are somewhat isolated within union circles, and organized labor in the Northwest has thus far been reluctant to put its full weight behind ecological conversion (or industrial transition) programs when limited efforts have been made in this direction, since this is seen as an unnecessary concession to preservationists who wish to reduce logging levels. Matters are made worse by the fact that the major environmental organizations have shown little direct concern for the plight of the workers and have only recently begun to think in a rather modest fashion about industrial transition. Under these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that the labor unions themselves have been overshadowed in this area by conservative coalitions that are unabashedly anti-preservationist and pro-capital. Thus when the God Squad announced in May, 1992 that it would exempt 13 BLM sales from the Endangered Species Act, a representative of the Oregon Lands Coalition was quoted as saying: "This decision is a victory for the workers of Oregon, however small it may be." What is noteworthy about this statement is not so much the position taken, as the fact that a conservative, pro-business and anti-environmentalist citizen's alliance such as the Oregon Lands Coalition (which includes groups such as cattle grazers and realtors, as well as the anti-union, grassroots timber-industry organization, the Yellow Ribbon Coalition, in its membership) should become — in the absence of a progressive trade union response to the crisis — the main voice for the "workers of Oregon" on the old growth question.

This failure of the regional unions to push hard for an ecological conversion program is partly explained by the fact that such a program is an extremely difficult strategy for unions in a natural resource industry in an out-of-the-way area of the country to pursue on their own — particularly under circumstances of a declining natural resource base, economic depression, capital relocation, union decline, and growing environmental controls. Ultimately, the pursuit of an ecological conversion strategy requires not imaginative initiatives in a depressed community so much as coordinated action on a national scale, and this involves finding the means to force the channelling of surplus into ecological conversion programs throughout the country. That sufficient surplus for this purpose exists can scarcely be doubted.³⁷ Recognizing this, the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union has proposed the creation of a "Superfund for Workers" that would offer up to four years of support to people displaced by environmentally destructive industries in order to enable them to pursue vocational retraining, or even an entire career shift by means of extended education. Other possible variations on this Workers' Superfund program include assistance to help form small businesses, and income supplements for individuals who decide to pursue less well paid work. The annual cost for a million workers might be \$40 billion.³⁸

The actual trend in the U.S. in recent years, however, has been in the opposite direction — toward less and less support for displaced workers. Federal outlays for worker retraining are only one-half what they were when Reagan was first elected. Under these circumstances, workers end up carrying a larger and larger share of the total cost to society of industrial transition. In 1987, public spending on employment and retraining as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 1.7 percent in Sweden, 1 percent in West Germany, 0.7 percent in France, Spain, and Britain, and a miniscule 0.3 percent in the United States.³⁹

³⁷ See Michael Dawson and John Bellamy Foster, "The Tendency of the Surplus to Rise, 1963-1988," in John B. Davis, ed., *The Economic Surplus in the Advanced Economies* (Brookfield, VT.: Edward Elgar, 1992), pp. 42-70. An abbreviated version of this research appeared under the same title in *Monthly Review*, 43, 4, September 1991, pp. 37-50.

³⁸ Renner, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-54.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

This situation is a problem not simply for workers and trade unions but for any environmental movement worthy of its name. Capitalism as a system devoted to accumulation without end is inseparable from a capital-intensive, energy-intensive economy — and thus necessitates growing throughputs of raw materials and energy, along with the creation of excess capacity, surplus labor, and economic and ecological waste. This should be differentiated from the basic needs of the broad majority of people, which have to do with the availability of steady and worthwhile employment and an improving quality of life, and therefore have no inherent link to an intensive process of ecological degradation. Northwest timber workers, for their part, want above all to protect their livelihoods and communities. In this respect the export of unprocessed logs, the relentless drive for ever higher levels of automation, the stress on clearcutting as opposed to "new forestry," the use of chemical weed killers, the burning of slash, and so on, make no sense from a workers' standpoint.

The "job blackmail" that often seems to compel workers to adopt an anti-environmental stance can therefore be seen to be tied to a system that promotes profits by means of the exploitation of both human beings and nature.⁴⁰ The direct route to the creation of a mass environmental movement is one that seeks to break the seemingly intractable conflict between jobs and environmental protection (a conflict symbolized nowadays by owls vs. jobs) by placing ecological conversion — the planning of new ways of working with nature while fulfilling social needs — at the very core of each and every ecological struggle. This necessarily means moving away from the attitude that environmentalism can somehow stand above and beyond the class struggle.

A shift toward a broad movement for ecological conversion and the creation of a sustainable society also means that the partnership between the state and the capitalist class, which has always formed the most important linchpin of the capitalist system, must be loosened by degrees, as part of an overall social and environmental revolution. This partnership must be replaced, in the process of a radical transformation of the society, by a new partnership between democratized state power and popular power.⁴¹ Such a shift requires revolutionary change that

⁴⁰ Renner, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁴¹ Müllband, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229, 233.

must be more than simply a rejection of capitalist methods of accumulation and their effects on people and the environment. Socialism — as a positive, not just a negative, alternative to capitalism — remains essential to any conversion process, because its broad commitment to world-wide egalitarian change, reflects an understanding of "how the needs of the various communities can fit together in a way that leaves nobody out, but that also satisfies the environmental requirements that are global. Within a socialist framework, the sources of the largest-scale and most severe environmental destruction could be dealt with head-on, in a way that has already shown itself to be beyond the capacity — not to say against the interests — of capital."⁴²

From an eco-socialist perspective there is no difficulty in seeing that the rapid destruction of the old growth forest is not about owls vs. jobs but ecosystems vs. profits. Ecology tells us that the destruction of a complex ecosystem rooted in a climax forest that took centuries and even a millennium or more to develop involves thresholds beyond which ecological restoration is impossible. We must therefore find our way to a more rational economic and social formation, one that is not based on the amassing of wealth at the expense of humanity and nature, but on justice and sustainability. Whether the issue is species extinction, death on the job, women's control of their own bodies, the dumping of toxic wastes in minority communities, urban decay, third world poverty, the destruction of the ozone layer, global warming, nuclear contamination, desertification, soil erosion, or the pollution of water resources, the broad questions and answers remain the same. As the authors of *Europe's Green Alternative* have written, we must choose between two logics: "on the one side, economics divorced from all other considerations, and on the other life and society."⁴³

⁴² Wallis, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

⁴³ Penny Kemp, et. al., *Europe's Green Alternative: A Manifesto for a New World* (London: Merlin Press, 1992), p. 16.