

# (DIS)ORGANIZING TREE PLANTERS:

## *Labour and Environmental Politics in the British Columbia Silviculture Industry*

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### INTRODUCTION

**B**RITISH COLUMBIA'S TREE PLANTING industry is designed to replace timber that has been harvested from public forests by firms licensed by the provincial Ministry of Forests and Range. The province's modern tree planting industry dates from the late 1960s and is economically and socially significant, especially in terms of occupational cultures. According to a recent book on BC forest policy, "tree planters are a cultural fixture in BC life, a fascinating combination of rural residents, counterculture enthusiasts, and university students looking for a quick infusion of cash."<sup>1</sup> Tree planters are often romanticized as mythic do-gooders who bring ecological renewal to the clear-cuts produced by industrial forestry practices.<sup>2</sup> However, tree planting is also centrally about work rather than about environmental volunteerism.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Cashore, George Hoberg, Michael Howlett, Jeremy Rainer, and Jeremy Wilson, *In Search of Sustainability: Forest Policy in British Columbia in the 1990s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001), 220-21.

<sup>2</sup> See Heather Pringle, "Wilderness Prophet," *Equinox*, November-December 1988, 16-22; Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer, "Planting the Seeds of Art," *Globe and Mail*, 13 April 2005; Jim Rankin, "Digging, Screaming, Crying," *Toronto Star*, 31 July 2005; Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Sarah Anne Johnson," *New York Times*, 11 February 2005. For a critical reflection on this topic, see Michael Ekers and Michael Farnan, "Planting the Nation: Tree-Planting Art and the Persistence of Nationalism," *Space and Culture* 13 (2010): 95-120.

Tree planters are employed by contractors and work under a piece-rate wage scheme in which individual wages are indexed to productivity. In coastal regions, planting starts in February and runs until the middle of April; it then begins again in September and runs until October. The work season in the interior is more condensed, running from May to July. The period of employment for workers ranges from two to eight months a year, depending on a planter's experience and desire (or otherwise) to work a "full" season (which is often determined by her/his student status). Tree planting is a precarious form of labour as the risks of contracts and bid-prices are transferred on to planters through piece-rates. If a contract is underbid, contractors may lower the price per tree paid to workers in order to ensure their own profit margins. In contrast, workers are generally powerless to prevent downward pressure on tree prices. Neither "student" nor long-term "career" planters receive a guaranteed number of work days over the course of a season. Moreover, tree planters receive no health benefits or pensions and are generally defenceless against falling piece-rates (beyond trying to find work with a higher-paying contractor).

This article examines attempts to organize BC tree planters in the 1990s. It is not surprising that attempts to organize tree planters have occurred, given the economic and physical vulnerability of tree planting work and the history of unionization in other sectors of the forest products industry (e.g., logging, pulp and paper, lumber production). Such attempts occurred both internally, through grassroots campaigns, and externally, through the involvement of industrial unions with deep-seated histories in British Columbia's forest industry. The most recent example of the former is the Canadian Reforestation and Environmental Workers Society (CREWS), while the most recent example of the latter is the Industrial, Wood, and Allied Workers of Canada (IWA). This article examines the context in which both the IWA and CREWS tried to organize workers, evaluates the strategies of each organization, and accounts for the ultimate failure of each organizing drive. These were important moments in the history of the forest industry, yet they have been little examined in the extensive literature on BC forests and related industries.

Tree planting lies at the intersection of environmental issues and the labour process. It is a form of labour tied to the forest landscape, which aims to bring ecological renewal to deforested areas. Yet, planting trees is also intricately connected to forest policies and the forest industry. The IWA viewed tree planting through a narrow social lens and was

concerned primarily with employment relations and material gains. In contrast, CREWS was keenly aware of the intersection of social and environmental issues in the tree planting industry and recognized that altering the organization of labour required changing the ecology of the forested landscape. Establishing secure, local employment for reforestation workers required the development of an intensified silviculture program that could alter the legacy of over-harvesting while securing the conditions of future production. Attempts to organize tree planters thus inform how we think about the intersection of labour and environmental issues.

At a conceptual level, this article explores the ways in which workers' struggles over wages and the organization of work are tied to forest policy reforms and nature more generally. Part of this struggle involves the subjectivities of workers and the ideological orientation of labour organizations towards "green workers" and "green labour." "Green labour" refers to a political agenda that challenges the opposition between environmental and labour politics and looks at the linkages, common interests, and strategies shared by these two social movements. Rather than seeing workers as inimical to environmental activism, as is often the case, a "green labour" perspective illustrates the capacity of workers to be at the forefront of both environmental and labour politics.

The first section of this article discusses the history of the IWA's involvement in the tree planting sector, including the successful unionization of Ontario tree planters. Subsequently, we examine the IWA's attempt to organize the BC tree planting sector in the 1990s, and its failure to gain traction partly due to a disjuncture between the organization's labour and environmental politics. The second section discusses CREWS's attempt to form a grassroots labour organization and focuses on both the context within which the organization emerged and its strategies for organizing. We then examine how CREWS's "green labour" agenda attempted to respond to both labour and environmental concerns. Finally, we evaluate why CREWS's organizing efforts failed. The third section reflects on how the experience of the IWA and CREWS informs our understanding of the production of social-ecological landscapes. We conclude with comments on the political implications of our argument in the current context of the BC forest industry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This article builds on extensive research conducted by the authors on various aspects of the forest products industry in British Columbia and the American Pacific Northwest. Much of the data concerning CREWS were collected by Ekers through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with key CREWS organizers and others involved in the tree planting industry. Data concerning the IWA and other aspects of the tree planting industry were collected by Sweeney

## THE IWA AND TREE PLANTING

Late in the 1940s, significant numbers of loggers and lumber workers in British Columbia joined the US-based International Woodworkers of America.<sup>4</sup> After three decades of growth, membership began to decline in the late 1970s, and it was devastated by capital substitution and recession in the 1980s. However, Canadian locals maintained greater bargaining strength than did their counterparts in the United States during the 1980s due to a corporatist agenda that brought relative stability to the relationships between labour, employers, and the state. As a result, Canadian locals broke away and formed the Industrial, Wood, and Allied Workers of Canada in 1987.<sup>5</sup> The choice of title was partly made to retain the “IWA” acronym. The Canadian IWA was also assisted by the centralized structure of locals, relatively high public support, and favourable exchange rates that gave Canadian producers an advantage in the North American market.<sup>6</sup> The Canadian IWA subsequently merged with the United Steelworkers of America in 2004.

It was in Ontario that the IWA was first successful in organizing tree planters. Until the early 1980s, most tree planting in Ontario was conducted by the provincial Ministry of Natural Resources, and tree planters fell under the jurisdiction of the Ontario Public Service Employees’ Union (OPSEU).<sup>7</sup> However, the responsibility for tree planting on public lands was shifted to forest products firms throughout the 1980s, most of which opted to use private contractors. Rather than paying tree planters hourly wages, as was previously the case, contractors paid piece-wages. Additionally, the small biological window for seedling establishment led contractors to find a production system and workforce that would match the temporal rhythms of tree growth.<sup>8</sup> Hiring university students was the most common solution to this problem. Students were drawn to the “adventure” of iconic forestry work and the perception that their earnings would be commensurate with their individual effort. The piece-

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through similar interviews with representatives and executives of the former IWA, tree planting contractors, and representatives of contractors’ associations. The identity of informants is kept confidential. Data were also drawn from publicly available IWA publications and CREWS documents, which are not publicly available.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Neufeld and Andrew Parnaby, *The IWA in Canada: The Life and Times of an Industrial Union* (Vancouver: IWA Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Marcus Widenor, “Diverging Patterns: Labor in the Pacific Northwest Wood Products Industry,” *Industrial Relations* 34, 3 (1995): 441-63.

<sup>6</sup> Widenor, “Diverging Patterns.”

<sup>7</sup> David Curtis, “A Legal View: Successor Rights and Subcontracting of Forest Work,” *Silva: Journal of the New Forest* 4, 1 (1989): 30.

<sup>8</sup> Prudham, *Knock on Wood: Nature as Commodity in Douglas-fir Country* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

wage system and diminished presence of the OPSEU was rarely contested by this group of workers, who embraced the restructured system of remuneration that – along with intensified work schedules of upwards of ten-hour shifts six days a week – allowed them to maximize earnings during an eight-week work season.<sup>9</sup>

The IWA first organized tree planters in the vacuum left by the OPSEU. Involvement came primarily where collective agreements covering mill workers and loggers were extended to include all activities conducted in the forests harvested by the parent firm. However, the policies of the IWA<sup>10</sup> – which sought to develop a permanent and locally based labour force – were often at odds with the needs, culture, and class-based ideologies of the growing student tree planting workforce. Ontario's tree planters were increasingly young adults who hailed from affluent middle-class households and tended to have guarded relationships with unions, perceiving them as a potential threat to the piece-wage system, which indexed wages to individual output. Additionally, many of the benefits traditionally offered by industrial unions – such as pensions and employment security – were not immediately desired by tree planters. The IWA thus focused its efforts on increasing piece-wages and improving working and living conditions. Although tree planters were seldom actively involved in the IWA, few balked at the increased wages and benefits brought about by unionization. This system persisted until recently in many timber-producing regions of Ontario,<sup>11</sup> but it has since diminished due to the externalization of logging operations and the removal of clauses in collective bargaining agreements previously extended to tree planters. Nevertheless, the involvement of the IWA in Ontario signalled the possibility of a role for unions in the tree planting industry.

Despite moderate success in Ontario, the IWA failed to organize tree planters in a similar fashion in British Columbia. It did, however, become involved in the broader silviculture sector between 1994 and 1999, during a period when the New Democratic Party controlled the provincial government. The Forest Renewal Act, 1994 – an anomaly during an era

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<sup>9</sup> Brendan Sweeney, "Sixty Years on the Margin: The Evolution of Ontario's Tree Planting Industry and Labour Force: 1945-2007," *Labour/Le Travail* 63 (2009a): 47-78.

<sup>10</sup> The Canadian Paperworkers' Union (now a component of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada) also organized a small number of tree planters in Ontario. See Sweeney, "Sixty Years on the Margin."

<sup>11</sup> The IWA was also successful in organizing a number of tree planting operations in Manitoba during this period. See IWA, "Union Has Set Pace for Manitoba Tree Planters for over 20 Years," *Lumber Worker*, March 1993, 15-16.

of ramped-up neoliberalism elsewhere in North America<sup>12</sup> – established Forest Renewal British Columbia (FRBC), a “Crown corporation with the task of making sure the province’s forests were managed in a sustainable fashion both economically and ecologically.”<sup>13</sup> Over twelve thousand jobs were created by FRBC in a span of five years at a cost of \$1.6 billion, most of which was raised through an increase in licensing fees charged to forest products firms in exchange for harvesting rights.<sup>14</sup> Over one-tenth of these jobs were created through the FRBC-funded New Forest Opportunities (NewFor), a coastal-based provincial Crown corporation geared towards creating permanent employment for displaced loggers and lumber workers.<sup>15</sup>

FRBC funding was concentrated primarily in coastal regions of British Columbia, which matches the geographic concentration of the IWA’s traditional membership. Most of the sixteen hundred jobs created by NewFor were not directly related to tree planting but, rather, focused on other non-extractive forestry work, such as stream reparation, trail building, brushing, and pruning.<sup>16</sup> It was not until 1997 that the FRBC became directly involved in tree planting; in this year, it contributed 14 percent of the trees planted in the province.<sup>17</sup> Despite criticism that many of the jobs created by the FRBC were short-term and low-paying, the IWA was generally supportive of the program’s efforts. The support stemmed largely from a collective agreement negotiated with the provincial government that made the IWA the exclusive bargaining agent for NewFor workers. However, funding fell precipitously in 2000, resulting in the cessation of the majority of FRBC programs and the end of the IWA’s involvement in silviculture and tree planting.

The IWA’s attempts to organize tree planters occurred immediately after FRBC funding was directed towards tree planting. At the same time, IWA membership was being decimated due to mill closures and harvest reductions – a result of both environmental concerns and the Asian financial crisis. Amidst declining membership and increased involvement in FRBC-funded activities, the IWA saw an opportunity to expand its scope by organizing tree planters, of whom there were

<sup>12</sup> George Hoberg, “Trade, Harmonization, and Domestic Autonomy in Environmental Policy,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 3, 2 (2001): 191-271.

<sup>13</sup> Neufeld and Parnaby, *IWA in Canada*, 291.

<sup>14</sup> Hoberg, “Trade, Harmonization, and Domestic Autonomy.”

<sup>15</sup> Ron Corbeil, “New Forest Opportunities Employment Starting Up on the Coast of BC,” *Lumber Worker*, June 1998, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Neufeld and Parnaby, *IWA in Canada*.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Lunny and Kim Pollock, “The Benefits of Unionizing FRBC Silviculture Jobs,” *Lumber Worker*, March 1998, 16-17.

over five thousand working annually in the province. Its overtures to tree planters are evident in an advertisement in the IWA's publication, the *Lumber Worker*. The IWA noted: "Tree planters and silvicultural workers are amongst the most exploited groups of workers in Canada. The majority have underpaid, migratory, and unstable jobs with short work years and few benefits. Many face unsafe work conditions and transient employment. We're out to change that" (see Figure 1).<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, forest products firms faced significant pressures to reduce reforestation costs. After the acquisition of MacMillan-Bloedel by Weyerhaeuser in 1999, almost all of British Columbia's prominent forest products firms engaged in merger and acquisition activity, a common strategy for firms during periods of low economic growth.<sup>19</sup> Many tree planting contractors also grew in a similar fashion in order to gain market share and economies of scale, and to provide a multi-divisional organizational structure on a scale similar to their clients. Client firms also pressured contractors to reduce costs in response to a seldom-publicized Price-Waterhouse Coopers report, which indexed silviculture costs across the BC tree planting industry.<sup>20</sup> Accounting divisions of major forest companies then pressured silviculture divisions to ensure that reforestation expenditures were within the bottom 20 percent of costs across the province. These internal pressures translated into downward pressure on bid prices for tree planting contracts as well as into lower piece-wages for planters.

The physical exertion required in the act of planting trees was also reduced during this period as foresters from industry and government alike embraced a new silvicultural paradigm, according to which seedlings were planted in the organic matter atop the forest floor rather than in the mineral soil below. The latter practice was common until the mid-1990s, and it required tree planters to select a proper "microsite" where organic material would be manually removed – or "screefed" – with shovels or boots before the seedling was planted. The hard-earned tacit knowledge required to achieve efficiency that previously differentiated experienced "career" tree planters from more ephemeral student workers was thus undermined. Moreover, although the production rate

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<sup>18</sup> Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of Canada, "We're on the Move," *Lumber Worker*, March 1999, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Other significant activity includes the acquisition of Weldwood of Canada by West Fraser Timber and the acquisition of Slocan Valley Forest Products by Canfor. Moreover, the majority of Weyerhaeuser's assets in British Columbia have since been acquired by Western Forest Products and Domtar.

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and tree planting contractor, Vancouver, BC, 6 March 2007.

# We're On The Move

**Tree planters and silviculture workers are among the most exploited groups of workers in Canada.**



The majority have underpaid, migratory, and unstable jobs with short work years and few benefits. Many face unsafe work conditions and transient employment.

We're out to change that.

The Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of Canada is organizing in all sectors of the forest industry to bring a better future for working Canadians.

We are also lobbying provincial governments for progressive forest and labour policies that will protect all workers.

Figure 1. Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of Canada (1999) advertisement geared towards the recruitment of tree planters.

per worker increased, piece-wages decreased significantly.<sup>21</sup> The new style of tree planting was better suited to a more athletic (and often younger) worker, which also disadvantaged many older “career” tree planters.

The IWA’s attempts to unionize tree planters were seldom well received by workers or contractors. Most egregiously, the IWA failed to recognize the cultural attachment of tree planters to specific aspects of the industry that differed from those found in traditionally organized production: the individualization of wages, tree planters’ embrace of seasonal work, and the transience and “adventure” of the sector. The IWA also wrongly assumed that labour-management relations were similar

<sup>21</sup> It is estimated that, when indexed for inflation, bid prices decreased by almost 40 percent between 1996 and 2006. See John Betts, “Setting the Scene for Capacity, Competition and Costs in the BC Silviculture Sector Heading into 2007,” memo to BC silviculture foresters and woods managers, 26 August 2006.



to the adversarial ones common in logging and lumber production. The relationships between tree planters, managers, and contractors are unique and generally less adversarial than are those in more traditional workplaces. This occurs for a number of reasons recounted by Sweeney and Holmes.<sup>22</sup> First, crew bosses often hire tree planters from their own social networks, and a multilayered and nepotistic relationship exists beyond the spheres of employment. This is reinforced by the fact that tree planters share living space with managers and, in some instances, contractors. Second, many tree planters strive to obtain managerial positions and are compelled to align their interests with those of management. Third, a significant portion of any managers' pay is based on the aggregate production of individual tree planters. It is therefore mutually advantageous for all parties to work cooperatively to ensure that earnings are maximized. Finally, IWA organizers failed to recognize the common perception among tree planters that managers and contractors were "larger-than-life" individuals. This was explained in an interview by a tree planting manager and organizer:

Tree planting is essentially this youth world and the thing with that is that you have one or two people in the camp who are old enough, mature enough, and has enough experience to ... see long-term political consequences. So you have this relationship where planters sort of bond to their contractor and he's daddy, and he's a "Samurai warlord" or however you want to see it, and there is this bond thing and [tree planters] will do everything to support him and his word is god.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, many in the tree planting community believed that the IWA was merely seeking to increase the number of dues-paying members and was not necessarily concerned about representing the specific interests of tree planters. CREWS organizer Claus Anthonisen stressed: "It's not the work they're interested in. It's the dues and the political clout of increasing membership."<sup>24</sup> Another CREWS organizer described the interaction between IWA organizers and tree planters:

These IWA organizers would just come in ranting some kind of ideological position. And it was "hello, we work for a living just like you

<sup>22</sup> Brendan Sweeney and John Holmes, "Work and Life in the Clearcut: Communities of Practice in the Northern Ontario Tree Planting Industry," *Canadian Geographer* 52, 2, (2008): 204-21.

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008. Another prevalent conceptualization of the relationship between tree planters and their supervisors and crew bosses is that of campers and counsellors at residential summer camps.

<sup>24</sup> Claus Anthonisen, "The Big Questionnaire: What You Said." *SWABC Newsletter*, Spring 1999a, 9.

guys, that's not where [tree planters] are coming from at all." It wasn't an exploited situation, it was actually embraced, not celebrated, but embraced as being a valued way of life and we wanted more of it in a sense, regulated by ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

The IWA organizers' poor understanding of the social and cultural intricacies of employee motivations and labour-management relations in the tree planting industry alienated tree planters. Some former IWA executives and organizers have lamented the missed opportunity. A former IWA executive reflected:

Hindsight being 20/20, we screwed up years ago when we had some clout ... It's really too bad that we couldn't develop some benefit package that applied to transient workers. It's not easy to do, like as you said, to work summers to put yourself through school, but how can you develop a benefit package that's useful to [tree planters] but doesn't cost an arm and a leg?<sup>26</sup>

The IWA's involvement in the Ontario tree planting sector and FRBC projects signalled the possibility that unions could play an enhanced role in the BC silviculture industry. The IWA clearly had the institutional capacity to organize tree planters, but it was out of step with more than just the occupational culture of tree planting. The relations between the IWA and Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) were generally combative and constituted a further impediment to organizing tree planters, who were wary of the environmental record of the large industrial union. This was particularly evident during the 1990s, when ENGOS staged highly publicized disputes over logging in coastal rainforests. In response to court injunctions and protests that limited the extraction and sale of timber in British Columbia (and in the American Pacific Northwest), the IWA staged massive counter-protests<sup>27</sup> and allied with its employers in an attempt to sustain the system of industrial forestry under which they had been employed for decades – essentially a system of liquidating timber resources.<sup>28</sup>

For the IWA, these alliances were logical as it shared a mutual understanding with employers and often felt betrayed by the efforts of ENGOS,

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Victoria, BC, 27 February 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous interview between Brendan Sweeney and IWA staff representative, Burnaby, BC, 11 June 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Neufeld and Parnaby, *IWA in Canada*.

<sup>28</sup> Scott Prudham, "Sustaining Sustained Yield: Class, Politics, and Post-War Forest Regulation in British Columbia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, 2 (2007): 258-83.

whom it perceived as unsympathetic to the devastation that timber-dependent communities faced during the previous decade.<sup>29</sup> However, the strategies and alliances of the IWA – and its failure to organize tree planters – were often counterproductive to its long-term needs to shape and maintain the environmental character of the forest landscape that provided the conditions of production.<sup>30</sup> Essentially, promoting unsustainable rates of harvest undermined future employment prospects for IWA members. Many of British Columbia's timber-dependent communities have recently suffered from this lack of (accessible) timber, and production is increasingly subject to the whim of market cycles and corporate employers.<sup>31</sup>

## CREWS

Organizing drives also emerged from within the tree planting industry in response to the vacuum of worker representation, the physical impact of tree planting on workers, the vulnerability of planters to downward pressure on wages, and, cutting across these three issues, the absence of direct control over the organization of tree planting labour. The first attempt to organize tree planters was made by the Pacific Reforestation Workers' Association (PRWA). During the 1970s, a significant proportion of tree planting work in British Columbia (as well as in the American Pacific Northwest) was carried out by worker cooperatives.<sup>32</sup> The initial objective of the PRWA was to professionalize and legitimize the cooperative-based tree planting industry. By the late 1970s, however, the system of cooperatives had begun to unravel and was giving way to a contractor-based industry. The PRWA then became an exclusively worker-oriented organization early in 1984,<sup>33</sup> while contractors formed the still-existent Western Silviculture Contractors' Association (WSCA). A representative of the contractors' association and former cooperative and PRWA member discussed the shift away from an association that

<sup>29</sup> Maureen Reed, *Taking Stands: Gender and the Sustainability of Rural Communities* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> The study of the exercise of agency of labour in order to shape the landscape in a fashion suitable for its (re)productive needs is described extensively by Herod and is a central tenet of the subdiscipline of labour geography. See Andrew Herod, "From a Geography of Labor to a Labor Geography: Labor's Spatial Fix and the Geography of Capitalism," *Antipode* 29, 1 (1993): 1–31.

<sup>31</sup> Nathan Young and Ralph Matthews, "Resource Economics and Neoliberal Experimentation: The Reform of Industry and Community in Rural British Columbia," *Area* 39, 2 (2007): 176–85.

<sup>32</sup> For an account of the experience in Oregon see Hal Hartzell, *Birth of a Cooperative: Hoedads, Inc., A Worker Owned Forest Labor Co-op* (Eugene: Hulogos'1 Communication, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> The PRWA rejected a proposal to join the IWA in the winter of 1984.

included contractors, managers, and workers: “It became quite apparent that there really were people that were taking risks, borrowing money, making companies and running them, and harbouring the loss or the profits, and there really were people who just wanted to show up and plant trees. I think that evolution was kind of natural.”<sup>34</sup> The PRWA rejected the option of joining the IWA in the winter of 1983–84 and persisted until 1990, when declining member participation and the financial burden of an extended and costly lawsuit in the late 1980s crippled the organization.

During the 1990s, capital, labour, the state, and ENGOS became mired in highly publicized disputes over forest uses and policy as each party pursued disparate agendas. The FRBC was created partly to address these conflicts, but tree planters and their employers were conspicuously absent from the discussions. Not until 1996 did tree planters actively and publicly debate the political economy and environmental legacy of British Columbia’s forest products industry. The initial protagonist was labour organizer and environmental activist Michael Mloszewski, who formed the Silvicultural Workers’ Association of British Columbia (SWABC) in that year in order to organize and represent tree planters and other silvicultural workers to both industry and the provincial government while working sympathetically with the most reputable contractors (most of which were members of the WSCA). In the face of overtures from the IWA, Mloszewski insisted that organization must occur from within the tree planting sector. In his words: “The IWA cannot supply the workforce and even in a crippling recession has little appetite for our jobs ... I feel very strongly that no one but silviculture workers can represent silviculture workers. In the next two years I believe we will face our last opportunities to take control of our workplace and shape the development of silviculture in the province.”<sup>35</sup> In 1999, the SWABC morphed into CREWS. The change in name was partially semantics, although CREWS sought more autonomy from silvicultural contractors and was more explicit about its labour and environmental agendas than was the SWABC.

In 1999, CREWS organizers – promoting themselves as a workers’ association – travelled British Columbia to enlist tree planters. This grassroots campaign was inspired by radical union movements of the early twentieth century. In the words of a CREWS organizer, “this was grassroots organizing going back to the ’30s. It would be like midnight

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous interview between Brendan Sweeney and representative of silvicultural contractors’ association and former PRWA member, Vancouver, BC, 24 June 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Mloszewski, “One Tree a Day,” *SWABC Newsletter*, Spring 1999, 2.

and they would find out that there is a camp three miles down the road. They would get in the car, sleep in the car, wake up in the morning, and talk to the contractor.”<sup>36</sup> By autumn 1999, CREWS had a membership of nearly one thousand, or approximately 20 percent of the labour force. Tree planters were members of worker-based associations, which did not have union certification.<sup>37</sup> The majority of support came from “career” tree planters with vested interests in the industry. Seasonal tree planters remained largely uninterested and uninvolved. An organizer interviewed suggested that “the 20 percent who [actually stay in the industry] tended to be our bread and butter, and even they were a hard sell. But they wanted it because they could still see that they would be doing something like this ten years from now.”<sup>38</sup>

According to one of the organizers, CREWS was interested in “very old-school union organizing with a need to really redefine the role of the union to be much broader than just the workforce [to] include communities, environmental justice issues, and issues of stewardship and empowerment.”<sup>39</sup> This reference to old-school unionism was paradoxically similar to “new,” or “community,” unionism, which recognizes that the labour movement must extend its agendas to broader communities while engaging workers traditionally marginalized from the labour market. The organizer quoted above recognized that the fortunes and labour-environmental interests of tree planters were dependent on their ability to produce a new style of organization. Karen Cooling, a representative of the Confederation of Canadian Unions, cautioned CREWS as follows: “The old models of craft unions, business-style unions, and social justice unions aren’t going to fit your needs. Everything is different. It’s exciting but it’s also a challenge because it’s not even as easy as putting a square peg in a round hole. It’s going to be a lot more complicated.”<sup>40</sup> CREWS faced a major challenge in defining a style of unionism that would work in

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Vancouver, BC, 9 August 2007.

<sup>37</sup> The difference between a labour association and a labour union is that the latter is legally certified as the employees’ primary bargaining agent. In British Columbia, a union is required to obtain the support of at least 45 percent of the proposed bargaining unit in order to proceed with a certification vote. The certification vote must then receive the support of the majority of ballots cast. Union certification allows workers to bargain for a range of issues (including wages, benefits, and workload) through formal channels and structures, while worker associations have no collective bargaining rights. CREWS did not achieve the 45 percent support required for a certification vote.

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, San Francisco, CA, 21 April 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Karen Cooling, as quoted in Beverly Brown, “Congress Report: Oregon,” *Canadian Reforestation and Environmental Workers Society*, Summer 1999, 4.

the context of a seasonal occupation and with a largely counter-cultural and middle-class labour force.

The fate of CREWS's organizing driving was partially dependent on its ability to reach out to other labour, social justice, and environmental organizations and communities. Promisingly, CREWS established connections to the Oregon-based Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters (AFWH), which was formed with the intent of simultaneously empowering forestry workers and addressing the racial conflict experienced by Latino reforestation workers in predominantly white timber-dependent communities in the American Pacific Northwest. Forging a connection with the AFWH enabled CREWS to frame its movement on a larger scale, while concomitantly "scaling down" its efforts by engaging with local communities in socio-environmental conflicts. For instance, CREWS sought common ground with local environmental groups near Nelson through successful protests over chemical brushing applications.<sup>41</sup> CREWS also actively supported the Green Belt Movement, an ENGO that sought to address economic and environmental problems related to the mismanagement of forests in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>42</sup> And, like the SWABC, CREWS was involved in a 1998 think tank to promote community forestry in British Columbia.<sup>43</sup> Yet, as Cooling predicted, CREWS organizers encountered significant difficulties. The organization's accomplishments were most evident when its interests were articulated in concert with broader community- and environmentally-based interest groups; however, these connections needed to be bolstered and extended in order for CREWS to succeed.

Interestingly – and despite CREWS's insistence on autonomy – the organizing drive was funded by a \$25,000 contribution from the Pulp, Paper, and Woodworkers of Canada (PPWC). The PPWC is the smaller of British Columbia's two unions representing pulp and paper workers and the first Canadian forest sector union to break away from its parent international union.<sup>44</sup> The PPWC has long been renowned for its fiercely democratic and environmentally progressive policies,<sup>45</sup> and it is highly

<sup>41</sup> Chemical brushing kills vegetation that competes with the commercially desirable seedlings planted by tree planters. It replaces more labour-intensive forms of manual brushing but leaves toxic caustic residues.

<sup>42</sup> *SWABC Newsletter*, Spring 1999, 14.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> The PPWC and its precursor, the Canadian Pulp and Paperworkers Union, broke away from the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Papermill Workers in 1963. The Canadian Paperworkers Union, which is now a component of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada, broke away in 1972.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Products Industry, 1934-1974* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

supportive of organizations such as CREWS and other grassroots ENGOS. Furthermore, the PPWC was a prominent rival of the former IWA. The differences between them stem partly from a history of the PPWC's raiding IWA-organized mills and partly from ideological differences in environmental and social policy, despite the fact that both unions represented fundamentally different sets of workers.<sup>46</sup> Organizers and environmental and labour groups felt that, politically, CREWS was more closely aligned to the PPWC's ideologies – particularly to its commitment to participatory democracy – than was the IWA. Finally, the acrimonious relationship between the IWA and the PPWC likely meant that the PPWC was politically motivated to ally with CREWS in order to spurn the IWA while gaining a foothold in the silvicultural industry.

The geographical difficulties involved in organizing tree planters were, and remain, immense. Planting camps house anywhere from 20 to 150 workers, and they are dispersed in often isolated and remote locations. Although organizers distributed literature to seemingly interested contractors, the latter seldom passed these pamphlets on to their workers. One organizer whom we interviewed remarked that literature distributed at conferences was “dumped in the wastebasket going out the door, or maybe a few words were said to the supervisor, but never did any of our stuff get remotely close to planters.”<sup>47</sup> CREWS organizers also hung posters in laundromats (often a mandatory stop for tree planters on days off), operated a website, and negotiated with contractors for access to camps.

The efforts of CREWS organizers to build a grassroots labour movement stressed the need to build on tree planters' common-sense attachment to the industry.<sup>48</sup> In a CREWS newsletter, Mloszewski suggested: “Most of us got into this business for similar reasons: adventure, love of wilderness, the lure of big money, physical challenge and the freedom of a gypsy life.”<sup>49</sup> These features, despite their “frontier,” and hence colonial and liberal undertones, represented the culture of work upon which organizing occurred. CREWS organizer Ananda Lee Tan captured the organization's organic character when he noted: “A good friend of mine once told me that the first step to any revolution is starting an affinity group. Well, as treeplanters we are privileged to have one already in

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<sup>46</sup> On average, pulp and paper workers represented by the PPWC earn between 50 and 75 percent more than do loggers and lumber workers organized by the IWA/USW. Work in pulp and paper mills is also much less labour-intensive than is work in sawmills or logging operations.

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

<sup>49</sup> Mloszewski, “One Tree a Day,” 2.

place.”<sup>50</sup> In short, tree planters across British Columbia were thought to belong to a broad occupational community regardless of where, for whom, and when they had worked. This is evident in both popular and academic accounts of the tree planting industry.<sup>51</sup> For Tan and other CREWS organizers, the “community of planters” provided a critical basis for solidarity among potential members. However, as Iris Marion Young suggests, the political invocation of a “community” is always contentious as internal relations of power are frequently underplayed.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the social contours of any given community are often defined by the social groups that are excluded from the community in question.

While CREWS garnered the support of career tree planters (some of whom had previous exposure to the PRWA), the organizers had limited success with the younger and more ephemeral student workers. Despite the desire for an organic labour movement, the personal biographies of CREWS organizers were not representative of the broader tree planting and silvicultural community. Most organizers had worked as tree planters for upwards of fifteen years. Their status as “career” tree planters set them apart from students who were rarely involved for more than four years. Moreover, the organizers’ histories of labour and political activism were often generated by previous involvement with the PRWA. While CREWS established broad linkages to the provincial forest products industry – largely through connections with the WSCA and PPWC – it lacked an organic connection to more ephemeral tree planters. In a retrospective comment on CREWS’s shortcomings, one organizer interviewed suggested that “there was a generational shift in my assessment,” adding that he “realized if there was one area where CREWS faltered it was [in] really fostering a lot of new involvement when we got things going.”<sup>53</sup>

CREWS’s contribution to forest politics in the province was relatively small when compared to other labour, industry, and state and environmental actors. However, the organization was not entirely ineffectual. FRBC initially excluded silvicultural workers from its Forest Worker Transition Program, which provided financial support for retraining displaced forest workers, but CREWS’s actions ensured that silvicultural workers were eligible for such benefits. Additionally, CREWS participated

<sup>50</sup> Ananda Lee Tan, “Firing Line: Reforestation Workers of the World Unite,” *Silviculture Worker’s Association of BC Newsletter*, Spring 1999, 3.

<sup>51</sup> See Helene Cyr, *Handmade Forests: The Tree Planters Experience* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1998); Sweeney and Holmes, “Work and Life in the Clearcut.”

<sup>52</sup> Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism (Thinking Gender)*, ed. Linda Nicholson, (New York: Routledge, 1990) 300–23.

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, San Francisco, CA, 21 April 2009.



at the first provincial community forestry conference, which resulted in the inception of a number of pilot projects.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, CREWS – in conjunction with the WSCA and provincial Ministry of Labour – participated in reviews of the Employment Standards Act. Its aim was to establish standard employment practices regarding issues critical to silvicultural workers (such as shift scheduling and length), criteria for overtime and travel compensation, and ceilings on camp or motel costs.

The influence of CREWS is particularly important considering that tree planters wield relatively little agency in actively creating landscapes in their own interest and frequently eschew doing so. This constitutes a major impediment to organizing. Focusing on the fact that CREWS failed to earn union certifications does little justice to the politics of socio-ecological hope and possibility espoused by the organization. CREWS recognized that its campaign carried political, economic, *and* ecological ramifications. A struggle over the organization of work was connected to altering workers' social relations to the forested environment. As one organizer observed:

Silviculture is actually this place where you end up taking the landscape into your own hands and healing it without basically being romantic about it. You're getting it back to functional through labour. And there is a very political component to that because suddenly you realize this isn't a perfect world, this isn't a fairy landscape. This is a real place and human beings should be able to make a living maintaining it. That's green labour as far as I can see.<sup>55</sup>

CREWS provided a social and ecological vision that attempted to negotiate a middle ground between protecting nature for aesthetic contemplation and recreational pursuits, on the one hand, and liquidating timber resources in the name of short-term profits and employment, on the other. Perhaps the most progressive aspect of CREWS's agenda was its recognition of the role of labour in the construction of sustainable economies and ecologies. Central to this vision was an appreciation that socio-ecological histories can be created through labour. And "green labour" represented the potential to renew the ecological landscape

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<sup>54</sup> See Ben Bradshaw, "Questioning the Credibility and Capacity of Community-Based Resource Management," *Canadian Geographer* 47, 2 (2003): 137-50; James McCarthy, "Neoliberalism and the Politics of Alternatives: Community Forestry in British Columbia and the United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, 1 (2006): 84-104; James McCarthy, "Devolution in the Woods: Community-Based Forestry as Hybrid Neoliberalism," *Environment and Planning A* 37, 6 (2005): 995-1014.

<sup>55</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

while also providing sustainable economic benefits. In this respect, CREWS's political ideology was aligned with critical perspectives on the intersection of social and environmental life, which suggests that human labour is central to the making of environmental landscapes.<sup>56</sup> This position on environmental politics counters the defeatism that typifies some currents of environmentalism. It so does by insisting on the possibility of producing social and ecological landscapes differently, and moreover, that labour can be a protagonist in this process.

The social and environmental politics of CREWS were ambitious and often disconnected from labour struggles, normatively and narrowly understood (e.g., contestation of wages).<sup>57</sup> In a recent article, Scott Prudham emphasizes how a progressive social movement in the Vancouver Island community of Youbou has attempted to recast the subjectivities of workers. Prudham demonstrates how successful community mobilization involved the self-transformation of anti-environmental loggers and mill workers into more socially and ecologically progressive subjects.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, CREWS sought to remake the subjectivity of silvicultural work and transform the forested landscape. Combating the itinerant nature of tree planting and the prospect of declining piece-wages required that it reframe its workforce as skilled professionals rather than as manual labourers, much as had the PRWA twenty years before. According to CREWS organizer Claus Anthonisen:

Silviculture workers must be prepared to transform themselves from spacers and planters into the actual caretakers of young forests in BC. They should aspire for a system of payment which rewards both quality and quantity. They should be ready and willing to undertake contracts near their homes where they will undertake the whole process

<sup>56</sup> Noel Castree, "The Nature of Produced Nature: Materiality and Knowledge Construction in Marxism," *Antipode* 27, 1 (1995): 5-36; Noel Castree, "Marxism and the Production of Nature," *Capital and Class* 72 (2000): 5-36; David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Nature* (New York: Blackwell, 1984); Neil Smith, "Nature at the Millennium: Production and Reenchantment," in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, ed. Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (New York and London: Routledge, 1998) 271-85; Erik Swyngedouw, "Circulation and Metabolisms: (Hybrid) Natures and (Cyborg) Cities," *Science as Culture* 15, 2 (2006): 105-21.

<sup>57</sup> Recent work by Mann highlights the notion that labour struggles seldom concern narrow agendas; rather, there is an inherent concern regarding a broader cultural politics focused on issues such as gender, race, class, and nationalism. See Geoff Mann, *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> Scott Prudham, "Tall among the Trees: Organizing against Globalist Forestry in Rural British Columbia," *Journal of Rural Studies* 24, 2 (2008): 182-96.

of bringing a clearcut back to life, where they will turn a seed into a forest.<sup>59</sup>

In this sense, tree planters would help transform silvicultural labour into a field in which workers could work locally and full-time, undertake a series of projects, and be remunerated on the basis of the quantity and quality of trees planted. Redefining work along such lines could have challenged the worker insecurity endemic in the tree planting industry.

Anthonisen's comments also suggest that transforming the experience and organization of tree planting labour cannot be done in isolation from the policies and practices governing the "working forest," a term commonly used in British Columbia to recognize both the economic and ecological values of forest land.<sup>60</sup> Raymond Williams argues that "it is important to avoid a crude contrast between 'nature' and 'production,' and to seek the practical terms of the idea which should supersede both: the idea of 'livelihood,' within, and yet active within, a better understood physical world and all truly necessary physical processes."<sup>61</sup> CREWS understood that production and nature could not be separated in tree planting. This was captured in the remarks of an organizer who noted: "The great hope of the silviculture workforce ... was that there was a kind of middle ground between the environmental approach and your full on right-wing approach of a 'log it all and make as much money as you can.'"<sup>62</sup> More specifically, the middle ground that CREWS supported was in line with community forestry models that devolved control and/or ownership to local actors, fostered higher value-added forms of production, enhanced participatory and democratic decision making, and diversified forest uses and values. Anthonisen remarks that CREWS's

long term ideal [was] to support the opportunities represented by the growing number of community forests. Opportunities to create a more

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<sup>59</sup> Claus Anthonisen, "What a Long Strange Trip," *Canadian Reforestation and Environmental Workers Newsletter*, Summer 1999b, 9.

<sup>60</sup> More specifically, the "working forest" is defined as "all Crown forest land in [British Columbia] outside of protected areas and parks." This definition was created as part of an attempt, simultaneously, to increase certainty about forest resources for economic actors, to increase the ease of administering public forests, and to recognize the need for environmental stewardship. See British Columbia Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management, *A Working Forest for British Columbia: Discussion Paper* (Victoria: British Columbia Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management, 2003), 3.

<sup>61</sup> Raymond Williams, "Between Country and City," in *Second Nature*, ed. Richard Mabey (London: Jonathon Cape, 1984), 237.

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

labour intensive approach to forestry by focusing on the total value of each hectare of forest, as opposed to simply destroying it, and then leaving it fallow for eighty years, to obtain a single export product. There is work enough for all of us out there, work that is probably both more dignified, more paying and more creative.<sup>63</sup>

What set CREWS' vision of community forestry apart from others was its unwillingness to devolve management rights to an imagined "community" and its insistence on placing it in the hands of labour.<sup>64</sup> CREWS specifically sought to promote tree planters – based on their position in relation to forestry work – as the protagonists in the production of a working community forest. In the words of one organizer: "When labour is the key component in terms of all of this there are all sorts of benefits, there is education, there are all ranges of community getting out there, from people after retirement and young kids. And it reintegrates the community within the landscape."<sup>65</sup> Regrettably, CREWS did not last long enough to realize its joint labour and environmental agenda. Yet, its organizing drive reveals a clear attempt to link environmental and labour issues in a cohesive political project.

CREWS mounted a short-lived campaign that, in the mind of one organizer, "was a very aspiration-oriented organizing drive." What it didn't do, he added, was "actually ground those aspirations in actual critical paths [regarding] how [it was] going to ... achieve [its goals and] ... the strategies [it was] going to apply."<sup>66</sup> There was certainly a wide-eyed and hopeful character to CREWS's efforts. But hope does not necessarily translate into institutional capacity and financial resources. Despite the support of the PPWC, CREWS organizers were required to be self-sufficient during much of the organizing drive. This was often

<sup>63</sup> Anthonisen, "What a Long Strange Trip," 5.

<sup>64</sup> Community forestry has also been criticized for relying on a romantic and seamless notion of what constitutes a community. Ben Bradshaw argues that "it is difficult to speak of a unified voice of a community that reflects a single priority, given the factions, inequalities and other differences within communities." In addition, James McCarthy has detected a regressive neoliberal agenda articulated in community forestry. McCarthy suggests that variants of neoliberalism are evident in the increased use of market forces and metrics in the formation of forest and environmental policy, the privatization of "Crown land," a shift towards voluntary regulatory mechanisms, and the devolution of management functions to non-state actors. Lastly, community forestry does not necessarily challenge the broad contradictions inherent within the accumulation of capital but, rather, seeks niches within the productive consumption apparatus of capitalism. See Bradshaw, "Questioning the Credibility and Capacity"; McCarthy, "Neoliberalism and the Politics of Alternatives"; and McCarthy, "Devolution in the Woods."

<sup>65</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, San Francisco, CA, 21 April 2009.

achieved by working in the tree planting camps they visited during the drive. Burnout was common, given the demands of organizing while working as a tree planter. The possibility of receiving funding from the FRBC was never realized due to the program's demise in 1999. Nor was there a guarantee that improved institutional or financial capacity would have led to success. As an executive of the PPWC responsible for funding CREWS noted:

We put \$25,000 towards organizing tree planters, but it became pretty obvious that was going to be next to impossible to do ... There were too many part-time and seasonal workers, too many contractors in the business. It was just going to be an organizing nightmare ... It was going to take much, much more than \$25,000, and I don't even know if we would have been successful in getting more than one or two certifications. I don't think tree planters had a clear idea of how to organize. There were too many worksites, and you couldn't get to them all at once.<sup>67</sup>

The barriers to organizing tree planters are extensive. Challenges included a young seasonal workforce with no long-term commitment to the industry, dispersed work sites, a lack of organizing resources, and a ubiquitous spirit of libertarianism that permeates the workforce and contractors alike. The piece-wage system also inhibits many of the traditional bases of collective action and solidarity as it individualizes workers' material interests while simultaneously aligning them with those of their managers or employers. Towards the end of the CREWS campaign, organizers considered options for unionization both internally within the leadership and broadly among the membership. One organizer, with an anti-vanguard impulse, suggested that he "was just more interested in people deciding for themselves and taking a stand on what they wanted, and going for it."<sup>68</sup> Others supported unionization, preferably with the PPWC. However, support for unionization among the broader membership was low. According to one organizer: "At a certain point when I realized – where I pulled out of it – that 80 percent of our current membership said to us that they did not want to be affiliated with any union of any sort, and at that point I just went, well, forget it. You guys are completely missing the boat here."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Anonymous interview between Brendan Sweeney and former PPWC president, Kamloops, BC, 15 October 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Vancouver, BC, 9 August 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

The libertarianism and middle-class background of the majority of tree planters was possibly the most significant impediment to organization. As one of those involved reflected:

There were three drives and one with CREWS and every one failed. Why? Well [one previous organizer] thinks that planters are just fucking idiots. I'm just saying, part of that, but also partly the class background, which ... would be mid-to-affluent liberal, which is also wary of labour, wary of unions, wary of the left, even though they are closet left. They are left in that romantic sense, which is not really thought-out. Also, again with that sense, the upbringing of the middle and affluent post-fifties generation is that the world is your oyster and you can't have anyone tell you [what to do]: again, that pseudo veneer of libertarianism. We all know where libertarianism ends up – right-wing.<sup>70</sup>

Frustrated by CREWS's shortcomings, this organizer invoked the classic veil of false consciousness in suggesting that workers failed to see their own interests. But the affluent middle-class liberalism of tree planting is not a false ideology that masks reality; rather, it is performative in that liberal individualism leads people to enter and remain in the industry. Such an ideology reinforces notions of individualism and rejects broader communitarian solidarities. However, liberal ideologies – in addition to growing numbers of workers planting trees for the “experience” – are formidable barriers to progressive organizing.<sup>71</sup> One of those involved concluded, cynically, that the majority of tree planters “are just out there for a good time, you know, [to] get completely shit-faced and get laid with any luck, and then go back to their real life.”<sup>72</sup>

#### LABOUR GEOGRAPHIES AND THE MAKING OF NATURE

Since the early 1980s, there has been a good deal of interest in the ways in which processes of capital accumulation shape the making of space. This work emphasizes how capitalism survives through the reconfiguration of economic landscapes. It argues that profitability can be renewed by building infrastructure and opening up new spaces of production,

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

<sup>71</sup> Brendan Sweeney, “Producing Liminal Space: Gender, Age, and Class in Northern Ontario’s Tree Planting Industry,” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 16, 5 (2009b): 569–86.

<sup>72</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Nelson, BC, 15 August 2008.

distribution, and consumption.<sup>73</sup> In the mid-1990s, the literature was criticized for affording capital a determinant role and portraying workers as passive subjects who had little role in making economic landscapes.<sup>74</sup> As a corrective, Andrew Herod insisted that:

The production of space in particular ways is not only important for capital's ability to survive by enabling accumulation and the reproduction of capitalism itself, but is also crucial for workers' abilities to survive and reproduce themselves ... It becomes clear that workers are likely to want to shape the economic landscape in ways that facilitate this self-reproduction.<sup>75</sup>

The IWA and CREWS both tried to secure the interests of workers through their attempts to organize tree planters. The IWA attempted to increase its union density in a period of declining membership and industrial restructuring. Conversely, CREWS sought to change the geography of silviculture production by challenging the transient nature of tree planting work and localizing silviculture activity in specific communities. As one CREWS organizer suggested, "just looking at the money pot, looking at the amount of trees that are to be planted – because they are literally mowing the interior forests flat – this should not be an itinerant workforce that is going to reforest and maintain those plantations."<sup>76</sup>

In a related vein, geographers Steven Tufts and Lydia Savage have called for more emphasis on how workers shape "cultural landscapes," which, they suggest, "are implicitly beyond material questions."<sup>77</sup> This raises the related but largely neglected question of how workers shape "environmental landscapes."<sup>78</sup> Scott Prudham's recent work on the Youbou Timberless Society in British Columbia offers a geographical examination of this nexus as he investigates how laid-off forestry workers

<sup>73</sup> David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Smith, *Uneven Development*.

<sup>74</sup> Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Andrew Herod, *Labor Geographies: Workers and Landscapes of Capitalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001); Noel Castree, "Labour Geography: A Work in Progress," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31, 4 (2007): 853–62.

<sup>75</sup> Herod, *Labor Geographies*, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and CREWS organizer, Victoria, BC, 27 February 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Steven Tufts and Lydia Savage, "Labouring Geography: Negotiating Scales, Strategy and Future Directions," *Geoforum* 40, 6 (2009): 945–48.

<sup>78</sup> Fred Rose, *Coalitions across the Class Divide: Lessons from the Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Brian Obach, *Labor and the Environmental Movement: The Quest for Common Ground* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004); Kenneth Gould, Tammy Lewis, and J. Timmons Roberts, "Blue-Green Coalitions: Constraints and Possibilities in the Post-9/11 Political Environment," *Journal of World Systems Research* 10, 1 (2004): 90–116.

challenge extractive forestry practices by recasting themselves as environmental workers focused on labour intensive forms of production and as advocates of sustainable and community forestry.<sup>79</sup> Despite this promising work undertaken on the intersection of labour and environmental issues, more research is needed on how workers produce environmental landscapes in their own interests.

Space is more than the geographical terrain upon which social processes occur. In fact, space is actively produced through different social processes, which render it, in geographer Neil Smith's words, "no longer an accident of matter but a direct result of material production."<sup>80</sup> There are extensive connections between nature and space.<sup>81</sup> To consider a landscape entails investigating its spatial forms and environmental content, both of which bear the traces of human activity. In this view, "nature" is not simply a *tabula rasa* atop of which society is mapped. Both physical and representational "natures" are invariably produced, and labour is a protagonist in their production.<sup>82</sup> Considering the intertwining of nature and space allows a heightened awareness of how, for better or for worse, workers shape environmental landscapes.

The IWA and CREWS had oppositional positions regarding the production of environmental landscapes in the long-term interests of workers. However, the IWA was shortsighted in focusing on the extractive component of forestry at the expense of the silvicultural industry, in which the goal is to ensure that the conditions of production (whether they be the availability of merchantable timber or the public acceptance of a "sustainable" industry or both) are reproduced. A 2007 strike in coastal British Columbia by former IWA logging and lumber locals now represented by the United Steelworkers (usw) demonstrates this. The usw framed the struggle as a protest against health and safety conditions, the contracting-out of logging, and the export of raw logs, all of which are valid issues in the reproduction of labour and a sustainable provincial forest industry. However, the union failed to address the fact that previous collective bargaining agreements were complicit in the liquidation of local timber and, thus, local work. The relegation of timber harvesting to remote locations and second-growth forests has

<sup>79</sup> Prudham, "Tall among the Trees."

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Uneven Development*, 75.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*; Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*; Erik Swyngedouw, "Techno-Natural Revolutions: Scalar Politics and Franco's Wet Dream for Spain, 1939-1975," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32, 1 (2007): 9-28.

<sup>82</sup> Castree, "Nature of Produced Nature"; Castree, "Marxism and the Production of Nature"; Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*; Smith, *Uneven Development*; Smith, "Nature at the Millennium"; Swyngedouw, "Circulation and Metabolisms."



decimated the profit margins of coastal producers and compromised local employment. In response to declining competitiveness associated with this style of production organization, employers – also key culprits of overharvesting – attempt to establish more financially and temporally flexible production systems (e.g., contract logging) at the expense of the union and its members.

In contrast, CREWS recognized that existing harvesting policies and practices (e.g., “mowing the interior forests flat”) were neither socially or nor ecologically sustainable. CREWS made the case that an intensified silvicultural program was necessary to secure the ecological conditions of forested landscapes and employment possibilities for both silvicultural workers and forest workers more generally. Although CREWS never achieved this social and ecological vision, its grassroots attempt to realize such a political program illustrates something of what might be possible. Considering how workers produce new natures is important to any social movement geared towards the renewal of labour politics. More generally and at a normative level, political actors must increasingly demonstrate their ability to address the question of nature, broadly conceived. The IWA was complicit in the production of a nature that would not sustain labour’s long-term interests. However, there are other possible productions of nature that suggest ways in which labour movements can gain environmental legitimacy while establishing the material basis of survival and reproduction.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, does our discussion mean for future attempts to organize tree planters? These are difficult times for forestry workers, including tree planters, across Canada. In a recent interview, one tree planter has painted a stark view of the future of forestry work in British Columbia: “Thanking our lucky stars that we got on here when we did, keep hearing stories about shutdowns and layoffs everywhere else. So we soldier on, paying bills and making do. Shit, [Port] Hardy is a tough place, the whole Island, but the North especially, tough times up here, drugs, alcohol, sketchy people.”<sup>83</sup>

This person was apprehensive about CREWS’s attempts to organize tree planters in the late 1990s, but, in light of the current crisis, he noted: “If [organizer] Ananda [Lee Tan] came to talk to me today, after a long

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<sup>83</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and experienced tree planter, Toronto, ON, 23 March 2009.

career, I would have been a bit more responsive to his concerns, a bit more sympathetic. Especially about the full-time employment part.”<sup>84</sup> While economic crises do not guarantee progressive political responses, increasing unemployment and precarious futures may incite sentiments more in line with radical political trajectories. Despite changes in the views of some, a renewed organizing drive in the BC tree planting industry remains unlikely. Yet, there are lessons to be learned from the efforts of the IWA and CREWS, and from our discussion of labour and environmental politics.

The inability to forge connections between tree planters and organized labour was possibly the biggest impediment to the efforts of CREWS and the IWA. Uncertainty regarding the desires of the general tree planting population persists. Similarly, it is unclear which issues could be raised by tree planters themselves to provide traction for future organizers. Wages remain a central concern, and it is unlikely that tree planters would refuse increased piece-wages, such as those gained by the IWA in Ontario. A desire for higher piece-wages is a logical rallying point in the early stages of an organizing campaign; however, in reality, such a goal is extremely difficult to achieve due to simultaneous pressures from clients to reduce costs and increased competition among contractors. Nonetheless, low prices have provoked threats of work stoppage and have resulted in wildcat strikes, with employers’ promising an extra penny per tree to return to work. The decline in piece-wages between 1996 and 2006, along with renewed cost pressures, may be sufficient for some planters to reconsider their relationship to organized labour.<sup>85</sup> Future organizing attempts must acknowledge this, even if realizing higher piece-wages is difficult to achieve. Other issues may have more purchase, and first among these might be challenging “free,” or unpaid, work. Tree planters are generally paid only for the trees they plant, yet they are regularly required to perform other unpaid work. This includes loading and unloading seedlings from trucks, setting up and taking down camp, and extensive travel time, all of which are socially compulsory. This matter promises the most immediate gains as it is essentially forbidden by current labour legislation.

CREWS also struggled with geographical difficulties in gaining access to tree planters. Most camps are remote, and all are scattered. Some contractors deliberately denied organizers access. However, the adversarial stance of some contractors may be changing. The decline in piece rates

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Betts, “Setting the Scene.”

since 1996 and labour shortages in western Canada resulted in the loss of experienced workers and an increase in younger and less experienced individuals. This drove home to contractors the value of experienced workers. An increasingly ephemeral labour force creates challenges for contractors as injury rates increase alongside declining production and quality levels. Contractors and the wscA have a vested interest in maintaining a stable and experienced labour force and may entertain organizing campaigns in order to meet their need for stability. When interviewed regarding the possibility of organization, a wscA representative remarked, “sometimes I wish they would.”<sup>86</sup> This is a seemingly odd statement from the leader of a contractors’ (i.e., an employers’) association. However, a cooperative relationship with the wscA would not, alone, enable the union organization of tree planters. Community groups are pivotal when it comes to reaching the labour force: CREWS and the IWA both learned this lesson the hard way. Environmental and social justice organizations on university campuses and in tree planters’ social and residential “hubs” may provide organizers greater access to tree planters than would the contractors and supervisory staff in camps. In addition, as the labour force becomes more ethnically diverse, community groups become an even more critical means of gaining access to potentially interested tree planters. South Asian and First Nations people have long worked in the silviculture industry, and, despite CREWS’s admirable attempts to reach out to them, little headway was made in connecting with these segments of the labour force. Community unionism is often aimed at engaging groups of workers who have traditionally been marginalized from the labour movement, while simultaneously engaging leaders from within marginalized communities. It is therefore likely that community unions may be better received than industrial or occupationally based unions. Finally, there have been widespread improvements to information and communication technology since CREWS’s organizing drive in 1999. Many tree planting camps offer wireless internet, and social networking sites have been used to help successfully organize geographically dispersed workers elsewhere in Canada. Such sites offer organizers frequent and regular communication with tree planters, and, as is often the case with social media, participation is frequently high among younger demographics of people. Social networking sites thus hold potential for renewed participation in the labour movement

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<sup>86</sup> Anonymous interview between Michael Ekers and Western Silviculture Contractors Association Representative, Toronto, ON, 9 February 2007.

by providing a culturally relevant means to communicate with seasonal and geographically dispersed workers.

Institutional capacity is also necessary. In the case of CREWS, even the generous \$25,000 grant from the PPWC was not enough to provide stable financial footing. Future attempts to organize tree planters will need to involve approaching other unions and organizations for financial and institutional support while simultaneously maintaining connections with community forestry groups and organizations such as the AFWH. Wood certification programs may also provide one avenue for the involvement of labour organizations. Schemes such as those offered by the stringent Forest Stewardship Council (unlike those administered by the industry-led Sustainable Forestry Initiative and Canadian Standards Association) require producers to meet environmental *and* social criteria. Neither the WSCA nor tree planters are likely to balk at efforts made by more stringent and socially responsible certification schemes requiring the use of socially responsible contractors. This could also provide institutional capability for the WSCA or a silvicultural workers association or union to pursue progressive silvicultural policies.

One of the stark contrasts between CREWS and the IWA was their respective relationships with environmental groups. The former embraced many aspects of the environmental movement, while the latter was openly hostile to its efforts. Any renewed effort to organize must establish a “workable” middle ground between the interests of environmentalists and those of labour. The ambitions of CREWS and the role of unions such as the PPWC in addressing both social and environmental issues illustrates a progressive articulation of interests common to both the environmental and labour movements. CREWS’s efforts to prevent exposure to chemical fertilizers and the application of chemicals in brushing work and their support of community forestry demonstrate the ability of a tree planter’s organization to make positive socio-environmental gains. A partnership between a silvicultural workers’ organization and forest certification bodies could bolster the legitimacy of the former within the forest products industry, the environmental movement, and the general public. Finally, tree planters are witness to the hubris of industrial logging. Here, a workers’ organization may provide a judicious perspective on the environmental legacy of the forest products industry and, in doing so, enhance the perception of unions in a period of public criticism and backlash.

Although both CREWS and the IWA failed to accomplish their goals, their efforts signal the possibility of a significant role for organized

labour in the silviculture industry. The missteps and potential of CREWS and the IWA offer a glimpse of the contours that a future organizing campaign might take. In our opinion, if there is a moment in which such a campaign is needed, it may be in the current economic crisis.