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POLITICS: Can push for climate bill forge a lasting labor-enviro alliance?**SECTION:** SPOTLIGHT Vol. 10 No. 9**LENGTH:** 1867 words

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The push for climate legislation has bolstered an alliance of unions and environmentalists, raising the hopes of liberal activists who have long sought a lasting and influential relationship between green groups and labor.

The Blue Green Alliance -- a collaboration of six unions and two environmental groups -- arrives after decades of intermittent cooperation and some major disputes.

"Both of these movements have realized they really need each other to get what they want," said J. Timmons Roberts, a Brown University sociologist who has written on labor-environmental coalitions.

The Sierra Club and the United Steelworkers, after years of work together, formally launched the alliance in 2006. The effort expanded in 2008 and 2009, adding the Natural Resources Defense Council and several unions -- the Service Employees International Union, Communications Workers of America, Utility Workers Union of America, Laborers' International Union of North America, and the American Federation of Teachers.

The alliance has focused largely on supporting legislation that would impose national curbs on greenhouse gas emissions and boost deployment of low-carbon energy sources that both groups say will create scores of new "green jobs." But the alliance is also pushing for workplace-organizing legislation -- labor's top priority -- as well as changes in trade policy and curbs on industrial toxics.

Not everyone is convinced the effort has staying power.

Critics of the House-approved climate bill -- the American Clean Energy and Security Act, sponsored by Democrats Henry Waxman (Calif.) and Ed Markey (Mass.) -- doubt the measure will generate scores of jobs. If they're correct, labor's backing for the environmentalists' agenda will crumble, said Kenneth Green, a resident scholar with the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

"Despite all the happy talk from the environmentalists, Waxman-Markey is going to cost a lot of jobs, and those will be union jobs that will be outsourced to other countries," Green said. "When the unions see the results of this collaboration in a couple of years, they will be more cautious about collaborating."

For now, the alliance is booming, with a combined membership of partner groups of 8 million and a budget that has grown sixfold over three years to

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roughly \$6 million this year, said David Foster, the alliance's executive director and a former Steelworkers official.

About 60 percent of the coalition's funding comes from foundations and the balance from the member groups, he said. Its paid staff has grown considerably, and last month it registered federal lobbyists for the first time.

The alliance is active in several states to rally support for the climate bill and has brought members to Washington to lobby on Capitol Hill. Last week, it kicked off a national tour with former Vice President Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection that will make the case for the bill in several manufacturing-heavy states.

"I think we represent an extremely potent educational force in the country by being able to reach out through those 8 million members and pull them together around a common vision of how we use environmental investments to improve our economic opportunities," Foster said.

Activists and congressional aides say the alliance helped craft provisions in the House-passed climate bill they hope will prevent emissions rules from harming so-called "trade exposed" industries. The bill includes free emissions allowances for energy-intensive sectors like steel and cement.

More controversially, it also allows for eventual tariffs on certain imports from nations that don't require major emissions curbs.

The alliance played "a significant role" in shaping the measures, said Matt Dinkel, a spokesman for Rep. Mike Doyle (D), who represents Pennsylvania's steel country and helped steer the bill through the Energy and Commerce Committee.

That support has included lobbying several swing votes in the House, which passed the climate bill in a narrow 219-212 vote in late June. "Our office heard extensively from both the Blue Green Alliance and their individual member organizations," said Roxane Geraci-Militello, a spokeswoman for Rep. Debbie Halvorson (D-Ill.). "All emphasized the manufacturing job creation potential of the climate bill, especially in Illinois." 'Boots on the ground'

Labor-environmental organizing is far from new.

The late labor advocate Tony Mazzocchi began linking workplace safety with broader environmental health issues in the 1960s as legislative director of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. His work is credited with helping enact the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

And more recently, labor and environmentalists made common cause protesting global trade rules they both called unfair in a major demonstration in Seattle in 1999. Elsewhere, the Sierra Club has worked with unionized laundry workers to seek safer cleaning agents.

The Apollo Alliance, formed in 2003, includes both labor and environmental groups to tout the job-creating and security potential of widely deploying renewable energy technologies, which is also a primary Blue Green Alliance message.

But Bracken Hendricks, who was the founding executive director of the Apollo group, said the Blue Green Alliance is playing a different role on energy policy. Apollo, he said, has focused more on policy development and framing a national message, in addition to regional and city-level work.

"What Blue Green is doing that is unique is really building on the strength of the membership organizations," Hendricks said. "Blue Green represents boots on the ground."

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James Gregory, a history professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, noted joint efforts at the 1999 World Trade Organization protests there, but said formalizing of the Alliance gives joint labor and environmental collaboration a "concreteness" and focus.

"This is potentially very useful going forward, especially if some of the policy that the collaboration is seeking can be delivered from Washington, D.C.," Gregory said. But he cautioned that the two sides are likely to be suspicious of each other.

"Like all new alliances or conditional alliances, it is going to have its awkwardness, and if a new and big energy policy does not really come together in Washington, D.C., then this may not work quite so well," he said.

Gregory said he is confident the effort will have staying power. "I think it is a really very intriguing and long overdue new set of understandings between two of the major forces for progressive politics in America, and as they come together, the whole is going to be larger than the sum of the parts," he said. Why now?

There are several reasons for the current labor-environmental collaboration, not the least of which is the expectation that some federal curbs on greenhouse gas emissions are coming.

"The conversation has moved from whether we are going to take action to how we are going to take action. That becomes a very obvious point of engagement for the labor movement," said Hendricks, the former executive director of the Apollo group, who is now a senior fellow with the liberal Center for American Progress.

Expectations of national greenhouse gas regulation rose with the election of President Obama, who, unlike his predecessor, President George W. Bush, has said he hopes to sign climate legislation. And though a climate bill will face a major Senate battle, U.S. EPA has said it plans to regulate greenhouse gas emissions using its existing authority if Congress fails to take action on climate.

Another major boost for the alliance is the closure of the biggest labor-environment fissure of recent years, the fight over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters had vigorously backed Bush's call for drilling in ANWR, but Teamsters President James Hoffa last year renounced the union's support for drilling there, and the plan lacks support from the White House and Capitol Hill.

Meanwhile, the steep economic downturn has increasingly led Democrats and environmentalists to argue that alternative energy will help stem manufacturing job losses.

And the Senate's political landscape provides an opening for labor influence, even though national union membership has fallen sharply over the past 25 years. Manufacturing states with considerable union membership -- Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan -- are represented by senators who are seen as swing votes on the climate bill.

"In those states, unions probably have a lot more leverage than environmentalists," noted Roberts, the Brown professor, adding that combining forces provides even more strength. Complex trade issues

But Rust Belt senators and the alliance are strongly backing carbon-tariff provisions that have received a lukewarm White House response.

Obama has expressed unease about the border-adjustment language in the House-passed bill, saying in late June that "we have to be very careful about sending any protectionist signals out there."

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Also, several trade groups that represent companies doing business internationally, such as the National Foreign Trade Council, have warned against the measures, alleging that they could spark a "green trade war."

Jerry Taylor, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, argues that hinging support for climate legislation on inclusion of the trade measures will sap backing from corporations that would otherwise be willing to back a cap-and-trade plan.

"If the environmental lobby and the labor unions can come to terms with policies which impose protectionist barriers on the U.S. economy, that would not surprise, given the context," Taylor said. "But for all that, you create opposition to Waxman-Markey because of those protectionist barriers."

Ten Senate Democrats this month wrote to Obama expressing "strong support" for the border mechanism. They said this and other provisions that they call vital to U.S. manufacturing competitiveness under a climate regime are needed for them to back a bill (E&ENews PM, Aug. 6).

Signing the letter were Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, Carl Levin of Michigan, Evan Bayh of Indiana, Robert Casey and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, Jay Rockefeller and Robert Byrd of West Virginia, and Al Franken of Minnesota.

The Blue Green Alliance cheered the letter, and the alliance's executive director, Foster, expressed confidence that White House views on the trade issue would not ultimately threaten the bill. "I think it is crystal clear, and I think the administration knows this as well as I do, that you do not get to 60 votes in the Senate without dealing with the trade-exposed, energy-intensive industries," he said in an interview.

Foster said the climate bill could be the most significant economic opportunity the country will have over the next 25 years. "If we fail to take that opportunity, we will be paying for that with lost jobs and lost employment opportunities for decades," he said.

"It is an economic restructuring bill for the global economy," he added. "We should not pretend that it isn't. Instead, we should do it right."

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