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## Labor-Environmental Coalition Formation: Framing and the Right to Know<sup>1</sup>

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*This article examines the formation of a cross-movement coalition between elements of the labor and environmental movements in New Jersey. We explain the successful formation and initial political campaign of the New Jersey Work Environment Council with an expansion of the theoretical perspective of frame analysis. We propose a model of a coalition collective action frame that offers several important insights into the active role coalition actors play in the construction of a common frame uniting union and environmental activists. Using qualitative data gathered from interviews, observations, and document analyses of two major campaigns, we argue that the coalition frame allowed new political opportunities to be created, leading to the establishment of the most sweeping right-to-know laws in the United States. We conclude the discussion of coalition framing by examining political constraints on the framing possibilities of coalitions, specifically by exploring how the discursive shift from the right to know to the right to act failed to expand the influence of the cross-movement coalition as originally expected by its members.*

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**KEY WORDS:** blue-green coalitions; collective action; environment movement; framing; labor movement; politics.

### INTRODUCTION

Labor unions and environmental organizations occasionally become untraditional allies in the fight for the protection of workplace and environmental health. An increasing number of collaborations between so-called blues and greens have been identified by social movement scholars as an important

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dynamic between social movement organizations in the United States (Estabrook, 2006; Mayer, 2008; Minchin, 2003; Obach, 2004). Unions like the United Steelworkers are redefining the labor movement's political agenda, working to build ties with nontypical allies, including the environmental movement. This collaboration may potentially redefine the relationships between these two social movements and offer new opportunities for advancing workplace safety and environmental health through the linkage of two distinct narratives of risk.

Social movement organizations that work together in coalitions may be more likely to succeed than individual organizations (Gamson, 1990, Jones et al., 2001, Rose, 2000, Van Dyke, 2003). However, the networks of potential coalition partners available to particular social movement organizations may be constrained to within-movement partners (Van Dyke, 2003). This limitation on potential coalition partners may reduce the likelihood of success when issues or solutions affect a diverse array of social movement organizations. Cross-movement coalitions involving organizations from a variety of social movements are thus more likely to provide a broader base of mobilization that increases success around cross-cutting issues. For cross-movement coalitions to be formed, however, movement organizers must invest additional resources and energy in building bridges between partners with potentially conflicting collective identities.

In the context of blue-green coalitions, relationships between the labor and environmental movements exist within a complex web of clashing interests, electoral politics, and attempts to form both short-term and enduring coalitions. Working-class activists often find middle-class activists to be unresponsive or condescending (Mix and Cable, 2006). Fundamental class differences across the two movements often perpetuate the stereotype of a "jobs versus the environment" divide between workers and environmentalists. In this class-driven model, unions and other labor organizations are interested primarily in protecting existing employment opportunities and, to a lesser extent, economic growth, which is often idealized by the labor movement as creating new jobs. Unfortunately, in the contemporary U.S. economy, economic growth is not always associated with new jobs and is instead driven by downsizing and outsourcing. Environmental protection and regulation, which arguably can limit economic growth and potentially eliminate existing employment opportunities, are perceived as a threat to jobs—driving the labor movement to frequently ally with industry in opposition to environmental organizations (Gottlieb, 1993; Kazis and Grossman, 1990; Mayer, 2008; Schnaiberg et al., 1986). Fighting the traditional "growth model" has sometimes brought labor and environmental interests more in line with each other, since the elimination of jobs to promote growth also ends up eliminating efforts to promote environmental protection and occupational health in production.

In these rare circumstances, labor and environmental organizations have been able to see past "jobs versus the environment" divides and develop collaborative campaigns and coalitions to address problems of mutual concern.

These “blue-green alliances” are representative of an understudied social movement phenomenon identified by Van Dyke (2003) as “cross-movement coalitions.” Although coalition formation and behavior have been examined in the social movement literature, these coalitions are usually from within a single social movement. Cross-movement coalitions involve organizations from a variety of social movements and are facilitated and maintained by a different set of mechanisms. In particular, labor-environmental coalitions represent an ideal social movement dynamic for study due to their frequently oppositional ideologies and the inherent challenge of bridging two movement cultures. Further, since studies of coalitions rarely explore cross-class coalitions (Mix and Cable, 2006), our study approaches bridging across movements and classes.

This article examines the formation of such a cross-movement coalition involving labor, environmental, and community organizations in New Jersey during the 1980s. The New Jersey Right-to-Know Coalition developed in response to community and worker concerns with the risk of contaminant exposure from New Jersey’s sizable chemical industry and related releases of toxic pollutants. Building on the political momentum from a related campaign in Philadelphia, environmental and labor activists in New Jersey made a crucial decision to partner in their push for regulatory reform of the state’s hazardous material management system. Rather than pursue individual campaigns, New Jersey environmental actors gave up on a near victory to partner with labor activists to win a more sweeping reform than either side was capable of achieving on its own. Our analysis focuses on this seemingly instrumental decision to build a coalition, and demonstrates how the success and longevity of the blue-green coalition was dependent on the construction of a coalition collective action frame.

Based on Van Dyke’s analysis of the conditions in which cross-movement coalitions are likely to form, we examine the formation and initial campaigns of the New Jersey Right-to-Know Coalition. We emphasize the importance of framing, both in the development of the cross-movement relationships and the internal dynamic between diverse coalition partners. We examine how coalition partners orient and frame their approaches and ideologies to recruit partner-organizations and to overcome tensions. Because the labor and environmental movements are among the nation’s largest and most significant, this offers important substantive material that is relevant for understanding the emergence of other “unlikely coalitions,” which increasingly occur, but that have not been extensively explored by social movement scholars.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF CROSS-MOVEMENT COALITION FORMATION**

Traditional analyses of social movement coalitions focus primarily on intramovement alliances and relationships. From the organizational analysis of the civil rights movement (Morris, 1984), the women’s movement (Staggenborg,

1986) to the environmental movement (Lichterman, 1995), studies of interaction between social movement organizations (SMOs) tend to examine organizational relationships isolated within the context of a single social movement (Van Dyke, 2003). Even when interaction between movements is examined beyond organizations, analyses tend to focus on the “movement conflux” (Mottl, 1980) or “loose coupling” between movement and countermovement (Zald and Useem, 1987). These studies suggest that the dynamic relationship between movement and countermovement influences all aspects of organizational activity, from recruitment to campaign mobilization. Although the analysis of intramovement coalitions and movement-countermovement interaction contributes to the understanding of organizational interaction, it is limited in scope because organizations from similar or related movements are more likely to share common elements. Cross-movement coalitions require further investigation in order to understand how dissimilar groups, despite their differences, interact and develop collaborative relationships. Further, we must examine whether and how these collaborative relationships are sustained over time.

Organizational resources influence the development of cross-movement coalitions, though differently than resource mobilization theory suggests. Organizations within a single movement often compete for limited resources, and are thus unlikely to engage in coalition-building strategies during periods of resource scarcity (Minkoff, 1997; Staggenborg, 1986; Van Dyke, 2003). While a surplus of movement resources is more likely to increase the formation of within-movement coalitions, cross-movement coalitions are less driven by the availability of economic or organizational goods. Cross-movement coalitions typically draw from different resource pools and are potentially less affected by resource availability. Resource scarcity may in fact drive the formation of cross-movement coalitions when conditions adversely affecting one movement’s resources encourage partnering with a different type of movement, in order to access a different pool of resources.

In labor-environmental coalitions, each movement utilizes fairly distinct resources. Environmental organizations rely on voluntary memberships, grant support, and individual donations, whereas unions utilize membership dues and hierarchical organizational structures. Although union members occasionally join environmental organizations out of individual interest, the overlap in potential direct membership fits a competitive model that would discourage collaboration (Obach, 2004). Alternatively, the effect of resource scarcity for an individual movement, such as the labor movement, may drive certain unions to reach out to nontraditional partners (Clawson, 2003). Fifty years ago, unions represented roughly a third of the workforce, but today the figure is 10% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). The resultant decline in financial resources generated through dues and political influence has substantially weakened the movement. Hence, some limited political influence might be found from collaborations with external, nontraditional allies.

In one of the few studies to explore the dynamics of cross-movement coalitions, Van Dyke (2003) utilizes resource mobilization and political

opportunity theory to explain why these coalitions might emerge. She finds that the mechanisms driving the formation of cross-movement collaboration are distinct from intramovement coalitions, which tend to develop in order to better raise and manage funds and other necessary organizational resources. In place of resources, Van Dyke finds that a shared collective identity between distinct social movement organizations facilitates the formation of cross-movement coalitions. These findings point to the importance of identity and ideological bridge-building between various social movement sectors, and lead us to examine what aspects of union and environmental collective identities might be linked, and to study the political contexts in which bridge-building occurs.

Coalitions may be perceived by social movement leaders as too risky to pursue when individual movement organizations face limited local political opportunities. Thus, as Van Dyke (2003:229) hypothesizes, while intermovement coalitions are likely to develop in response to local political threats (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992; McCammon and Campbell, 2002), cross-movement coalitions typically develop in response to broader political threats that challenge commonly shared values. For instance, blue-green alliances have been found to be much less likely to develop in Republican-controlled states (Obach, 2004). Whereas one might predict that unions and environmental organizations are motivated to collaborate against a common conservative political opponent, Obach's survey of movement leaders found that these organizations attempted to conserve political resources by limiting electoral collaboration and focusing on single-issue campaigns. Although cross-movement coalitions may be more likely to develop in the context of broad political threats, the effect of shifting political opportunities is less clear on the durability of such coalitions.

Although shifting political opportunities and resource scarcity may drive coalitions together, these mechanism tells us little about how the relationships across movement divides actually develop. The ties holding cross-movement coalitions together are more likely to be developed over time through the deliberate actions of movement leaders. Frame analysis views social movement actors as having the agency to guide the development of their organizations (Benford and Snow, 2000). Frames refer to interpretative schemata (Goffman, 1974) that allow individuals or social groups to locate and situate social phenomenon within their life space in a way that makes these phenomenon meaningful (Snow et al., 1986). Collective action frames are employed by movement leaders to "mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford, 1988). Effective frames are those that most resonate with broader cultural values and are therefore most salient with potential adherents' and constituents' life experiences (Kubal, 1998; Benford and Snow, 2000).

By actively shaping and constructing these collective action frames, coalition leaders bring together individuals from diverse organizations that may have never previously interacted. In addition to aiding in recruitment and conversion, collective action frames function internally within a social

movement organization by establishing a common interpretation of an ideology or perspective that unites movement members in a shared identity and purpose (Johnston, 1995; McAdam et al., 1996; Snow et al., 1986). Framing highlights what holds a coalition together, as various shifts in resources and political opportunity may threaten to pull it apart. Maintaining a coalition-based collective action frame that consolidates internal solidarity while weathering external forces requires leaders to constantly engage with coalition partners, and can often limit the development of new frames.

Benford and Snow's (2000:624) elaboration of frame alignment, and in particular frame bridging, "the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem," elucidates how multiple social movement organizations identify and utilize such a common discourse. We conceptualize this process of "linking" as the highlighting and elaboration of ideological similarities between organizational frames, in order to construct a coalition collective action frame that provides cohesion between the coalition partners' various ideologies.

Coalition leaders actively engage in the process of constructing coalition collective action frames by bridging ideological divides, but their ability to do so is limited by political opportunities and organizational resources external to the coalition and its potential member organizations. Shifting political opportunity structures can both enable and constrain the formation of cross-movement coalitions (Meyer and Corrigan-Brown, 2005). Although the construction of a coalition collective action frame is a necessary condition for coalition formation, shifts in political opportunities often create new opportunities for collaboration, such as backing a particular piece of legislation or political candidate. Conversely, shifts in political opportunities can create opportunities for conflict.

A thorough understanding of why cross-movement coalitions form and persist over time must be informed by a combination of resource mobilization, framing, and political opportunities. For labor-environment coalitions, the best synthesis may be the interaction between framing and political opportunities. Alone, the framing perspective fails to address the political context in which coalition leaders must construct a coalition collective action frame. Likewise, because cross-movement coalitions require careful attention to communicating across movement boundaries and facilitation of differences, the political opportunities perspective fails to account for leaders' agency in bringing groups together. By examining the interplay between political opportunity and framing, we can better understand the dynamics of cross-movement coalition building.

## METHODS AND DATA

This study is based on ethnographic and historical research of the formation and political trajectory of a cross-movement coalition involving labor,

environmental, and community organizations in New Jersey. Data were collected over a four-year period (2004–2008) and include retrospective interviews, participant observations, organizations' documents, and news media. A total of 27 interviews were conducted with the organization that was formerly called the New Jersey Right-to-Know, today known as the Work Environment Council (WEC), and related organizations. Subjects were identified through past and present membership rosters and through a snowball sampling frame that ensured equal representation of labor, environmental, and community leaders. This approach helped in recruiting participants from labor organizations, as this category experienced the highest levels of turnover in terms of individual participation in the blue-green coalitions. Many environmental leaders and activists in the coalition remained members and were therefore easier to identify.

Semi-structured interview questions asked respondents to identify their organization's core agenda and strategic goals, and how these goals and actions fit into the larger context of the cross-movement coalition. Questions asked respondents to reflect on their decision to participate in the coalition and the level of organizational support they received regarding their involvement. Respondents were asked to specifically identify their perceived costs and benefits of collaborating with nontraditional coalition partners. To supplement these findings, seven ethnographic observations of meetings, legislative hearings, protests, news conferences, and forums were also conducted. In addition, both published and unpublished documents from the Work Environment Council were collected and analyzed.

Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed using QSR NVivo, which allows qualitative researchers to assign codes to segments of interview transcripts and observation notes, and assists with the exploration of relationships within the data. Transcripts and notes were coded and analyzed according to a preexisting set of thematic topics, and new themes were developed through an inductive analytic process while coding the data. Extracts representative of these key themes are presented throughout.

## **CROSS-MOVEMENT COALITION BUILDING IN NEW JERSEY**

The New Jersey Right-to-Know Coalition formed in 1982 as a grassroots response to communities' and workers' concerns regarding the use, storage, and transportation of toxic substances. Although coalition leaders were successful in constructing a persuasive collective action frame, state-level shifts in political opportunity structures limited the strategies and tactics of the coalition following an early victory. This section concludes with an examination of the relationship between framing and political opportunities in the context of a failed attempt to advance what the coalition actors believed to be a logical transition from winning the right to know to pursuing the right to act on that information.



*A Joint Community and Worker Right to Know*

The history of the New Jersey Right-to-Know Coalition began across the Delaware River in Philadelphia, where occupational health and community activism during the late 1970s came together around widespread fear that the area's petrochemical refineries were poisoning residents, as community organizers partnered with union health and safety activists to lobby for a legislative reform of Philadelphia's chemical management policies (Ochsner, 1992). Leading this collaboration between community, environmental, and labor organizers was the Philadelphia Project for Occupational Safety and Health (PhilaPOSH), one of the first and largest Committees on Occupational Safety and Health (COSH) organizations. COSH groups were formed in the 1960s and 1970s to act as semi-professional organizations that aided workers, union and nonunion, with issues related to health and safety. In 1981, the community-labor coalition successfully backed the passage of the first community right-to-know law in the United States. Right to know refers to reporting requirements imposed on businesses using or storing and using hazardous chemicals that generate databases for public use on the levels of pollution and the potential health risks for particular communities.

Health and safety activists within the labor movement in Philadelphia were motivated to campaign for a right-to-know law by a growing frustration in trying to improve hazardous working conditions in settings where workers would be forced to work with unlabeled materials with unknown health risks. Activists viewed the denial of information to workers and health inspectors as chemical corporations' attempt to shield industrial trade secrets, thus preventing unions from negotiating with management over the right to know. Viewed by industrial managers as a contractual issue alongside wages and healthcare, the right to access proprietary information was treated as a private matter to be negotiated behind closed doors between industry and union representatives. Unable to win at the bargaining table, union leaders and health and safety activists framed the problem as a violation of a basic human right to access information regarding health and safety. This frame transformation marked a shift away from a traditional dispute between management and union leaders, to a broader social critique of corporate malfeasance. A growing consumer rights movement, combined with an increasing public distrust of many corporate practices, made for a broad societal-wide demand for more public rights to access information. An organizer from PhilaPOSH who was instrumental in the formation of the right-to-know campaign highlights the growing frustration with industry's reluctance to provide information on hazardous materials:

We would raise these kinds of points and all these kinds of problems, pointing out that there is no right, even at that late date which was approaching 1980—no right of workers to even know what it was that they were working with. That the company could just say: "you're working with 'Super-Wizzy-Clean Number 5.' And I don't care that your rash is all over your body and you can't breathe when you work with it. We don't have to tell you what it really is." And essentially that was the deal. And people were

incensed at that. Say, you mean to tell me that we don't have that right, right now? So it was easy to rile folks up. It was a real volatile issue.

Realizing that the political climate and public attitudes toward unions were shifting away unfavorably from labor after President Reagan broke the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike in August 1981, the PhilaPOSH activists worked with community and environmental organizations to broaden their base beyond unions and formed a cross-movement coalition involving a variety of social movement organizations, including environmental groups. By promoting a collective action frame that linked the rather narrow issue of the labeling of hazardous materials in the workplace to illegal industrial pollution affecting all of Philadelphia, the health and labor activists were able to recruit many powerful social movement organizations that had never campaigned on the behalf of labor unions before. For example, in March 1979, PhilaPOSH and the Environmental Cancer Prevention Center, a community education program, jointly organized a conference on toxic exposures that brought together over 350 labor, environmental, and community organizers, many of whom were meeting for the very first time. Many of the health and safety activists associated with PhilaPOSH had previously employed direct action tactics as part of union strikes and boycotts and welcomed the opportunity to challenge the political influence of the industrial corporations in Philadelphia by employing nontraditional tactics such as local community protests. Rather than working to improve workplace health by filing grievances and bargaining for additional safety measures, organizers decided to publicize the plight of the industrial worker and link hazards in the workplace to a major threat to public health.

The combined political clout of this coalition surprised the Philadelphia city council members and generated enough legislative support to pass the nation's first citywide right-to-know law. Unable to quell worker dissent solely through contract negotiations, local politicians and business elites were forced to concede the need for an improved approach to managing hazardous substances information. As labor and community activists were achieving success in Philadelphia, several local environmental organizations in New Jersey were beginning to formulate a plan for promoting the passage of a similar right-to-know law in their state. Fearing an accidental release from any of New Jersey's many chemical refineries, community and environmental activists wanted access to information pertaining to what chemicals they might potentially be exposed to from an accidental chemical release.

Our interviews reveal strong feelings of frustration among the New Jersey environmental community around the time the Philadelphia right-to-know law was passed. Unable to mobilize enough political influence to convince state politicians to enact the type of sweeping community right-to-know laws that many environmental groups desired, several environmental leaders felt that winning local city ordinances providing the right to know on a smaller scale was sufficient to advance their agenda. Many of the environmental

organizations involved in early efforts to promote a right-to-know law were small local groups who lacked the necessary coordination to manage a state-wide effort. They emphasized immediate needs to protect their families and neighborhoods, which translated into distinct political demands ranging from the complete elimination of all potential hazards to the provision of technical information on hazardous substances. Interest groups in New Jersey, particularly environmental organizations, have traditionally held relatively little sway over state politics due to their fractious and often contentious intramovement competition for scarce organizational resources and political influence. Facing a Republican governor backed by corporate interests, largely from industrial chemical firms, many environmental activists expressed frustration with the lack of immediate response from state legislators. In contrast to Obach's (2004) findings regarding the unlikelihood of blue-green coalition formation in Republican-controlled states, the challenge of facing a conservative government backed by the very industries creating the grievances galvanized activists from both movements to seek each other out and work together. However, this decision to collaborate would require several environmental groups to give up their local campaigns and shift their attention to the statewide efforts. Since previous efforts to organize a solely environmental or labor campaign to challenge the political influence of the chemical industry had failed at the state level, the would-be leaders of the blue-green coalition chose to promote an alternative organizational form and a new collective action frame to convince local organizations to join the new coalition promoting the right to know.

Antitoxics activism in the early 1980s was largely conducted by middle-class environmental activists who feared toxic waste buried in their neighborhoods or the drifting of poisonous fumes from refining facilities upwind from their neighborhoods. Groups like the Environmental Lobby, the New Jersey Environmental Federation, and the state Sierra Club were among the most prominent environmental groups lobbying for the right to know. These environmental activists framed the issue of right to know as a basic human right that should be granted to all individuals in order to protect themselves from toxic exposures. This framing typically labeled workers as part of the problem, lumping unions together with the chemical industry as a single antagonist. While these environmental groups narrowly advocated for community-based right-to-know legislation that would address the needs of local residents, leaders in the nascent coalition-building effort decided to push for a bill that would include worker *and* community rights to access information on hazardous substances. By framing toxic waste as "a toxic trespass" perpetrated by industry with the silent consent of workers, these antitoxics groups' initial campaign perpetuated the stereotypical "jobs versus the environment" approach to environmental organizing that historically led to the blue-green divide.

In early 1982, just as the possibility of creating a right-to-know law was gaining widespread public attention, several state legislators entered the political fray. Sensing that New Jersey could be the first state where such a major

shift in environmental policy occurred, politicians on both sides of the aisle began promoting their own versions of right to know. A junior state senator, Dan Dalton, had made environmental policy a centerpiece of his agenda and was quickly persuaded to champion the right to know. Recognizing the looming battle between industry and environmental groups, Dalton's legislative staff together with counsel from several activist organizations and their legal counsels made an instrumental decision to gain the support of organized labor before the industrial firms could coerce them into lockstep (Ochsner, 1992).

This crucial decision was guided by the experience of the labor organizers from Philadelphia, who joined the New Jersey push for a right to know because many of the workers whose health and safety they had fought for originally at the city level lived across the Delaware River in New Jersey and in some instances belonged to unions that represented workers in both states. Key environmental organizers, such as Jim Lanard of the Environmental Lobby, had previous experience working on legislative agendas and political campaigns with labor leaders—though not in direct collaboration or resource sharing. However, the familiarity with the operations of the labor movement and its prominent leaders in the state proved useful in obtaining meetings and persuading labor leaders to consider the possibility of joining a coalition. For labor organizers from Philadelphia who had worked with community and environmental groups to pass their city right to know, New Jersey represented a smaller geographic area in which to accomplish a statewide right to know in comparison to Philadelphia and with the excitement and experience from the Philadelphia campaign, PhilaPOSH organizers transitioned their campaign into New Jersey—finding the work of bridging relatively easy, as a labor organizer from Philadelphia elaborated:

The deal we did in Philadelphia was the right-to-know, not only for workers, but for community residents who may want information. That was a first and that really struck at the heart of a whole lot of this stuff that they were hiding from people in general. Workers were of course on the front lines of trying to get that information and protect their numbers from exposures and sickness and cancers and dying and all that. But the community suffered just as well from what was in the air and in the water and from fugitive emissions and spills, leaks, and fires and what have you. So they had a stake in it. When we began working in New Jersey, it was fairly easy to convince [environmental groups] that it was their fight as well as the fight of workers.

In a state with a high level of chemical manufacturing and refining, the number of political actors directly or indirectly dependent on the chemical industry was significant, and politicians advocating the right to know needed chemical worker unions and related services support to overcome political resistance. Major unions, such as the United Steelworkers of America, the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers, the United Auto Workers, and the Communication Workers of America all sent representatives to a May 1982 meeting with environmental organizers and state politicians to discuss the dynamics of a joint worker and community right to know. Over 50,000 workers were represented at the meeting by 32 unions that agreed to participate in the fledgling coalition.

Mirroring the Philadelphia campaign's emphasis on worker health and safety, coalition leaders approached union locals with workplace hazard organizing experience about collaborating with community and environmental organizations to pass a joint right-to-know law that provided an equal level of information to all parties. Drawing on the antitoxics framing of hazardous waste, coalition leaders utilized terms such as "toxic trespass" and "violations of rights" to describe the fear of not knowing whether hazardous chemicals might be stored or used at a facility in their backyard. These fears, captured in the testimony below from an environmental activist who had worked for years to address the issue of asbestos contamination, highlights the uncertainty and skepticism that many antitoxics groups held.

My neighbors and friends are dying by the week. It is a tragedy. But where do we go? ... How many of you are victims or potential victims? How many of you have been exposed to the water you drank that was supplied by an asbestos pipe? Or your children were exposed to asbestos ceilings in the schoolrooms or tile floors? How are we supposed to know?

In contrast, union organizers such as Matt Gillen of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union painted a slightly different picture in their legislative testimony.

Powerful disincentives exist against the dissemination of hazard information. Liability pressures from workers' compensation costs, engineering costs, and lost sales all contribute to a tendency to withhold delicate information. Basically, what we are saying is that we don't think we can trust employers.

While the environmental activist highlights the silent specter of toxic materials lying in wait to harm friends and family, the union organizer points to the structural constraints limiting an employer's motivation to share information that could reveal liabilities and additional costs to protect worker health. While the fear and uncertainty discussed by many other environmental activists worked well to build public interest, it provided few specific legislative solutions. On the other hand, unions' perspectives emphasized a more critical approach to fundamentally altering the point of production to revalue worker health and safety—an important goal among union activists, but one lacking in widespread public support. Organizers from the key organizations such as PhilaPOSH and the Environmental Lobby built on these two articulations of the problem and merged them together to frame the issue of right to know as a basic human right being violated by powerful corporate interests in the pursuit of profit.

By creating conceptual bridges between these two originally distinct frames and by constructing a common discourse with which to understand and perceive the problem of access to information on hazardous substances, leaders formed a cross-movement coalition. This common discourse provided a shared language through which both environmental and labor activists could critique industry by claiming that chemicals and substances stored and used within a facility were the sources of community and environmental contamination—a

series of “toxic circles” (Sheehan and Weeden, 1993) emanating outward from manufacturing facilities and impacting workers and communities alike. Rather than identifying singularly as environmentalists and trade unionists, coalition members could share in a collective action frame where everyone could define themselves as potential victims of unsympathetic industries interested only in profit. The coalition collective action frame provided a common ground to understand the similar experiences and grievances with the chemical industry from a shared perspective of the need for legislative reform.

Calling themselves the New Jersey Right-to-Know Coalition, New Jersey environmental leaders and former PhilaPOSH organizers developed a unified agenda to pass a worker and community right-to-know legislation, posing it primarily as a safety issue. They pointed to the cost to workers and their families from exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace, where accidents and chronic exposures killed thousands each year, and they emphasized the risks to residents living nearby these facilities. This definition centered on workers’ inability to access information on what chemicals were used and stored at their workplace. This diagnostic element reformulated a common antitoxics approach, which emphasized finding the source of pollution and eliminating it completely, regardless of who might be employed by a particular industrial plant.

Environmentalist concerns with toxic chemicals were largely hypothetical situations—a fear that New Jersey could face a major problem like the discovery of buried barrels of toxic waste under Love Canal, New York (Levine, 1982), or groundwater contamination of trichloroethylene and other industrial solvents in Woburn, Massachusetts (Brown and Mikkelsen, 1997). Workers in New Jersey, however, did not have to rely on hypothetical situations to promote the right to know. Workers’ moving testimonials provided a specific motivational framing element, both internally within the coalition to motivate community and environmental members to partner with the unions, as well as externally in motivating politicians to act quickly on the right to know. The political strength of the blue-green coalition hinged on the combination of two narratives of hazard, where the more widespread concern with public health among environmentalists and community activists overlaid the more substantiated incidents of industrial accidents and deaths among industrial workers in New Jersey. Furthermore, the primary counter-argument to the enactment of right to know on the part of industry focused on the economic costs of reporting requirements, as an industry lobbyist noted:

It is true that it is difficult to point to any single issue when a business leaves the state. But there are many nails that go into that coffin—maybe three, four, five nails—and we’re saying this right-to-know legislation will be another nail.

Having unions actively participate in the campaign for the right to know provided moving counterclaims to those of industry and reduced the credibility of their argument about the job loss impacts of such reporting requirements.

Community residents, who feared unknown hazards as groundwater poisoning, buried toxic waste, or air pollution, were close to winning their own community right to know that would have made available a certain amount of limited information on environmental contaminants. For most community members interested in promoting an antitoxic agenda, the chemical workers' plight was not part of their perspective. As one environmental member of the Right-to-Know Coalition explained about their attitude toward workers before becoming involved in the cross-movement campaign:

Yeah, because prior to that, I didn't think that workers either knew very much or cared very much about the exposures that they might have on the job. Or that they would feel that they could be empowered to do anything about it to address the situation. It's basically, okay you take that job. You know you're going to be working with hazardous substances ... that's tough. Take it or leave it. It didn't occur to me that people could actually affect the policy in a workplace.

After being approached by founders of the New Jersey Right-to-Know Coalition and listening to the accounts of hazardous working conditions, this activist began to see the connections between the workplace and the community, revising how she perceived the relationship between workers and environmentalists in the struggle for right to know.

Hearing those stories of working with substances that they didn't know about ... having their skin burn, their eyes burning, coughing, and seeing their fellow workers die ... made an impact on me. I realized that this wasn't a hypothetical. These were real cases of bad things happening.

Several other participants in the Right-to-Know Coalition recalled similar moments where their preconceptions regarding the "other side" were challenged during the sharing of personal narratives and experiences.

Environmental activists were attracted to several prognostic elements of the coalition's frame generated through the collaboration with union health and safety activists. For antitoxics activists in particular, access to information about chemicals of concern in everyday language was important, as one noted:

To us, the sexiest part of the law was these hazardous substance fact sheets that would be produced that would be written in everyday language. They would be developed for common hazardous chemicals that would be in the workplace. But these very same hazardous substances are also in household products, in pesticides. And we thought, once and for all we're going to have a fact sheet for all the pesticides that we're concerned about.

Union members provided similar testimony regarding the importance of basic knowledge regarding hazardous substances in the workplace. During a legislative hearing on the right-to-know bill, United Auto Workers representative Bill Kane:

placed a small red tank on the speaker's table and opened a valve, [letting] a colorless and odorless gas to leak into the room. As the gas seeped into the room, one state senator shouted, "Mr. Kane, I have a right-to-know what this is!" Kane responded with the token reassurance of an employer, "Don't worry. We've been using this for years and no one has died yet" (Ochsner, 1992:185).

Creating the link between hazardous chemicals and substances produced and stored in the workplace and potential exposures in community settings was crucial to building the diverse coalition, according to one activist:

So I saw workers and community people or environmental people who had never sat in the same room before. Never had a sense of who "the other side was." And it was interesting in the end, they were like, "You don't really want to shut us down?" And "Oh, you really just want it to be safer..." But you know, somebody who is a straight environmentalist and they don't have any interaction with workers, they don't think about this stuff.

Highly publicized environmental crises, including the discovery of dioxin contamination in a former manufacturing site in Newark and a chemical fire in Edison in early 1983, boosted support for the right-to-know campaign by increasing public awareness and sympathy toward workers. The solidarity and political savvy of the Right-to-Know Coalition helped maintain public and media attention on the proposed legislation during a year of political maneuvering and negotiations, until a bill was passed in August 1983.

The passage of the 1983 New Jersey Worker and Community Right-to-Know Act was a major victory for the coalition of labor, environmental, and community organizations. Besides helping bring about sweeping changes in industry's chemical reporting practices through the release of information, the campaign brought together many of the state's active groups. According to one environmental organizer:

Getting the right-to-know law passed was a very good organizing experience. It was a very good coalition building experience. We saw the common ground of workers in the communities. Workers that are exposed to the chemicals right there in the workplace, but the fact that these chemicals also disperse out into the community through emissions or being made into products that are being consumed by people. We also realized that the government wasn't going to be the ones to protect us. We had to fight for these rights.

This quote identifies several key elements contributing to both the success and longevity of the Right-to-Know Coalition. First, by relying on the frame alignment strategy of bridging in defining the right to know as a concern belonging to both workers and community residents, two groups of activists previously unfamiliar with the grievances and organizing capabilities of the other were unified under a single coalition umbrella. Second, in portraying both government and industry actors as antagonists, the coalition collective action frame motivated the previously polarized labor and environmental movements in New Jersey to collaborate in a cross-movement coalition.

### *Political Constraints on the Blue-Green Frame*

Though information is necessary to identify workplace and public health hazards, right-to-know legislation did not require the elimination or reduction of chemical hazards faced by workers and community members. In short,



workers could be informed about the hazards they might face on the job, but the right-to-know law did not empower them to protect themselves; instead, the law only granted workers the right to not work with a particular substance if information regarding its content and health risks was not made available. Workers were not granted the right to utilize any chemical health hazard information by accompanying and providing input to governmental inspectors or by participating in the survey of chemical use and storage that is used to comply with reporting requirements. Recognizing these inherent limitations for reducing chemical hazards right to know other than making more informed demands of industry, the coalition reconvened to expand its initial legislative victory. It sought to create and promote a new bill that would empower workers and community members to inspect workplaces and negotiate preventive measures to reduce exposures. This expansion on the right to know became known as the right to act, which entails the provision of legal rights to community and worker organizations to inspect businesses and industries and require companies to eliminate substances and processes deemed hazardous to public health and the environment.

This concept represented a significant divergence from the discourse around right to know. Now with right to act, coalition leaders (now the New Jersey Right-to-Know and Act Coalition) emphasized that concerned community members and workers could force a company to modify its business practices if information revealed through right to know provided evidence of a significant risk. This new agenda was a major modification to the coalition's collective action frame. With the right to know, the diagnostic framing strategies focused on the shared victimhood of workers and residents perpetrated by unsympathetic industrial corporations. Now, in advocating for a right to act the diagnostic framing transitioned the definition of coalition members from helpless victims to empowered citizens with the right to define private business decisions. This modification of identity and purpose did not sit well with all coalition members.

As the transition to pursuing the right to act advanced, the coalition's unity began to falter. While some coalition members who endorsed right to know saw the right to act as empowering workers and communities to promote health and safety by inspecting hazardous facilities and requiring production changes in response to identified risks, others thought the right to act went too far. To test the viability of the right-to-act concept, the coalition arranged several "good neighbor" programs where concerned community members living near a manufacturing facility were escorted through the facility to improve neighborhood-industry relations. Not everyone felt this intrusion of public oversight over private business decisions was justified, as one participant pointed out during her tour:

So the local volunteer fire chief lived in my community, as close as I do to this [manufacturing facility], and came along on the inspection. Actually at the end of the inspection, he told me that me that he didn't think that we had any right to go in there and do what we did. Even though he participated in it and was happy to come along. But

when it came down right to it, he didn't feel that we had the right to tell that business, to go in and look over, and tell them what we thought. That had just crossed the line of privacy and the right for somebody to conduct their business the way we want to.

Although the local fire chief did not represent the entire firefighter community in New Jersey, the firefighters' union was an important stakeholder in the fight for the right to know. Therefore, the reluctance of this union member of the coalition to shift from demanding information to demanding action is emblematic of a broader socioeconomic and political challenge for the coalition. Indeed, the right to act, as outlined in the proposed bill, implied enhanced community and worker oversight over industry's production decisions. Although coalition members agreed that the right to know was a fundamental human right, there was no such consensus regarding the framing of the right to act, since it conflicted with fundamental principles of free-market capitalism that resists excessive public oversight of industrial production.

Spearheaded by groups such as the New Jersey Business and Industry Association and the Chemical Industry Council, industry lobbyists launched an aggressive campaign to defeat the right-to-act law immediately following its introduction in the legislature. The Business and Industry Association's membership newsletter bluntly stated: "We have one issue that dwarfs all others in comparison, and that is the [Right-to-Act] Act. ... In its current form, it would be a nightmare for New Jersey employers." Recognizing their defeat back in 1983 with the passage of the Right-to-Know Act, industry quickly developed a united front to attack the credibility of the blue-green coalition. One reporter captured that rhetoric at one of the first public hearings: "Representatives of some of the state's largest industries opposed the act last night, conjuring up images during testimony of uninformed gadflies passing through factory gates and running amok" (Engler, 1992). Industry representatives resurrected more traditional arguments, claiming that right-to-act regulations would decrease the competitiveness of New Jersey's core industries in the global market and force companies to cut jobs in the state.

Industry representatives targeted their attacks against the Right-to-Know and Act Coalition, charging it with interfering in the private production decisions made by industry. The labeling of environmental organizations as "nosy neighbors" undermined the motivation of many coalition partners to pursue the right to act as evidenced in this environmental partner's experience:

The chemical industry honed right in on this ... the right to conduct themselves the way they wanted to couldn't be opened up to input from the community or from workers. That businesses run their businesses and workers have to do what they're told. And that the community doesn't really have any right to go in the door and come in and say I think it should be this way. And so that next step, the right-to-act, was a much more difficult position to back.

Rarely did industrial lobbyists question the right of workers to participate in joint health and safety committees or inspections. Only the additional element of community inspections figured in industry's attack on the coalition's framing of the right to act. Though the coalition emphasized the terrible

consequences of worker exposure to toxic substances, the environmental activists were singled out as the main proponents of an intrusion on a private business's right to operate as it saw fit within guidelines established by experts and lawmakers. While the coalition highlighted the small number of OSHA inspectors, the paucity of safeguards to protect workers, and the general lack of pollution prevention in the workplace, the Business and Industry Association and other industrial lobbyists emphasized the intrusion of nosy environmentalists into private business and the ignorance of lay citizens about the chemical industry. These attacks on the solidarity of the blue-green coalition fostered among policymakers and the general public a perceived disconnect between the need for right-to-act laws to protect workers against occupational death and disease and the proposed legislation that sought to allow community members to inspect chemical facilities.

The political assault on the right to act was further heightened by a sharp decline in manufacturing employment throughout the state. Jobs in heavy and light manufacturing disappeared throughout the United States during the recession beginning in the early 1980s, and this downturn remained on the public's mind throughout the Right-to-Know and Act Coalition's campaign. This socio-economic context ultimately heightened the potential for job blackmail by industry and contributed to the campaign's failure. Industry appealed both to politicians and the public with a claim that right-to-act would be the strongest factor in forcing industry and jobs out of New Jersey. Toxic hazards in workplaces, already somewhat invisible to the general public, became even less salient. Without major industrial disasters to highlight workers' plight, the media focused primarily on the community aspect of the labor-environment coalition.

Ultimately, the right-to-act campaign failed to accomplish its intended goals. After a clear defeat by industry, the blue-green coalition retreated to a stance of defending right to know from further counterattack and found other means of using information to improve community and workplace environmental health. Right to know has become a major issue in ongoing debates around the safety of storing chemicals onsite and the potential consequences of an accidental release or intentional terrorist attack. By emphasizing public and workforce rights to information on chemical hazards and storage amounts, the coalition continues to pressure the state and industry to eliminate or reduce storage and usage of hazardous substances. The monitoring of levels of hazardous substances has also become a tool to determine whether neighborhoods inhabited by poor and minority groups are overburdened with the presence of hazardous substances through the blue-green coalition's environmental justice campaigns.

## DISCUSSION

The formation of the blue-green alliance in New Jersey began with a realization that neither side could accomplish its ideal goals without the support of

the other. It is especially interesting that environmental activists, who were fairly close to accomplishing smaller-scale versions of the right to know benefiting only the environmental community, made a decision to withdraw their own campaigns and then partner with labor groups to fight for a different type of right to know. The decision had obvious instrumental value in that the divided environmental community became concerned that it might fail in its political campaign without the support of labor groups that had traditionally been viewed as sympathetic to industry interests. The driver behind this strategic shift is not solely the changing nature of political opportunities in New Jersey, but is also due to the power of strategic framing that enabled coalition leaders to build solidarity among the ranks of both the labor and environmental movements. Furthermore, labor support would ensure the long-term sustainability of any new right-to-know law, making it less likely to be weakened or dismantled later. Philadelphia activists, who developed a strategy based on political necessity, had personally experienced the transformative nature of a health-oriented frame to convince other labor and environmental activists that they shared a common interest. These bridge-brokers used this framework to build relationships and establish a partnership that changed the nature of environmental and labor organizing in New Jersey.

The connections between workers' personal experiences and environmentalists' interests in eliminating toxics in their communities can be seen as a form of frame alignment. Benford and Snow's (2000) elaboration of frame bridging as a strategy utilized by movement activists to link two ideologically congruent but structurally separate frames meshes well with the connections highlighted in the right-to-know campaign between occupational health and antitoxics activism. The coalition collective action frame of this blue-green coalition facilitates connections between the distinct interpretive frames of the individual members of the coalitions. Indeed, many partners had never met each other and thus had little reason to coordinate political agendas and share resources within a coalition. Individuals from both movements were motivated to collaborate based on their mutual identification of a collective right to access health-related information on chemicals. Coalition leaders actively constructed these connections by illustrating the links between hazardous working conditions and the release of toxic substances into the communities along the fence lines of the chemical facilities and into the surrounding environment. Thus Right-to-Know Coalition leaders bridged two unique movement cultures and fashioned a new form of solidarity between workers and environmentalists.

External efforts to divide the coalition by picking off individual members, such as the firefighter unions, failed. The chemical industry's divide-and-conquer strategy of job blackmail, successful in numerous other labor-environmental interactions, failed to undermine the coalition's collective action frame. Despite the slightly unfavorable political opportunities available to the coalition largely due to a Republican administration, the framing of the right to know as a basic human right and the capitalization of a number of major

chemical accidents as illustrations of the problem provided the political momentum necessary to achieve the passage of the legislation and ensure its long-term sustainability.

The successful right-to-know campaign hinged on the ability of coalition leaders to develop a collective frame to resonate with the individual and organizational identities of environmental, labor, and community activists. By focusing on the ubiquitous nature of toxic exposures and centering the prescriptive framing element on gaining access to information, coalition leaders constructed a collective action frame that crossed movement boundaries. This cross-movement frame allowed a united front to be presented to state officials and elected representatives, one that industry and corporate interests had not previously faced before. By building on a frame of health and incorporating right to know as a civil right, leaders developed a coalition collective action frame that bridged the labor-environment divide. A unique coalition frame compensated for the traditional divide and distrust between union and environmental activists by emphasizing a basic human right to health information. Twenty years later, this coalition frame remains the foundation on which collaboration between labor and environmental organizations is grounded.

Political opportunity structures played a limiting role when activists sought to expand their range actions. When the coalition decided to move past the right to know and demand a right to act, they questioned the sanctity of private property by promoting the role of community oversight of industrial production. This led to a better-organized countermovement of business interests, in the form of political lobbyists of the chemical industry. Facing this closing off of previously favorable political opportunities, the coalition was not able to accomplish its goals and the defeat threatened to divide the labor and environmental organizations. By identifying themselves as stakeholders who should be involved in the production decisions of industry, rather than as employees and outsiders who deserved to know about production decisions, the collective action frame was significantly altered in ways that threatened the internal solidarity of coalition members.

Many union representatives involved with the coalition feared that their membership would disapprove of their involvement with a campaign that so critically challenged the industries that employed them. Whereas advocating for the right to know involved demands for slight reforms that followed other existing laws like the information provisions in the Occupational Safety and Health Act, little precedent existed for community inspections of private facilities and the possibility of forcing industry to take action. Although workers in hazardous jobs would have benefited from such reform, the conceptual shift from right to know to right to act was too radical for many actors. These fears were increased when industry presented a united and fervent front against the right to act. As the political environment began to shift unfavorably away from the coalition, the vital support and testimonies provided by union members during the right-to-know campaign became sparse. Where the right-to-know campaign benefited from the real-world illustrations of the

hazards associated with a lack of information for workers, which added a crucial degree of credibility to environmentalists' hypothetical scenarios, the right-to-act campaign lacked clear cross-cutting connections between worker health and safety and the promotion of community inspections of industrial facilities. In the terms of framing theory, the right to act failed to resonate with all the members of the coalitions and threatened to pull the diverse partners apart.

To prevent schisms from occurring between individuals and organizations that did not agree with the right to act, the coalition ultimately returned to defending the right-to-know law and ensured its successful implementation by the chemical industry. This return to the original collective action frame was necessary to maintain coalition solidarity. It also was necessary given the strength of the countermovement by industry, which was able to leverage the claims of economic damage and potential job loss to its benefit. While framing was necessary to form the coalition, it was insufficient to maintain the coalition in the face of shifting political and economic opportunities. Although major political failures often lead to the dissolution of a social movement organization, the individual and organizational members of the coalition accepted the right-to-act loss and selected to work on their initial commitment to enforce the hard-won right to know. This commitment and the channels of communication forged during the political struggles contributed to the longevity of the coalition. Understanding this dynamic between the agency of coalition leaders in the framing of the coalition's identity and purpose and the shifting political context of New Jersey allows us to explain the initial success and longevity of this labor-environmental coalition.

## CONCLUSIONS

Cross-movement coalitions pose a challenge to traditional interpretations of social movements literature. As Van Dyke (2003) argues, the importance of collaboration across movement divides has been ignored for too long. With new economic and environmental challenges posed by global issues such as climate change and pollution created by the expansion of the goods movement industry, coalitions like labor-environmental alliances are likely to become increasingly common, and understanding their dynamics and potential is essential for contemporary theorizing about social movements. Because cross-movement coalition dynamics frequently operate opposite to what mainstream literature would suggest, future research into these mechanisms is needed. We have argued that framing plays a significant role in the formation of cross-movement coalitions when explored in conjunction with political opportunities and economic context. By focusing on how multiple ideologies are pulled together and managed within a coalition collective action frame, we can better understand how such a frame can be assembled using key elements that are common to all coalition partners.

In the case of labor-environmental coalitions, health concerns are likely to be the common ground on which long-term alliances are built. The growth in environmental health and environmental justice activism offers new opportunities for fusion between these types of environmental organizations and progressive labor unions. Coalitions similar to New Jersey's are emerging across the United States and internationally that follow an attempt to overcome past movement divides. Domestically, groups like the Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow, based in Boston, Massachusetts, have adopted a framework of precaution to meld occupational and environmental health activism. In the European Union, labor groups are working together with environmental organizations to redesign chemical safety management and address global climate change. Our approach to the study of blue-green groups is also relevant to the growth of other "unlikely coalitions," some of which will also involve environmental justice linkages with groups involved in a range of other seemingly disparate areas such as transportation activism and smart growth (Bullard and Johnson, 1997) and industrial ecology advocacy (O'Rourke et al., 1996). Other unlikely coalitions involve religious activism and energy policy activism. Since these groupings involve differences in beginning assumptions of each partner, it will be necessary to understand what brings together and maintains such joint efforts. Our approach to cross-movement coalitions makes it more possible to grasp the new dimensions of a society replete with many new combinations of social movements that cannot be understood by existing models.

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