

## Trade unions and the environment during the 1968 period

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### ABSTRACT

During the 1960s and 1970s, some parts of the European trade union movement stressed the urgency of mobilizing the working classes against occupational diseases and industrial pollution. This approach helped challenge the legacy of the union practices that emerged from the social and political compromises after Liberation, which postulated that economic growth was virtuous in nature and did not explore its ecological repercussions.



British workers who refused to handle asbestos protest against their firing, during the Trade Union Congress in Brighton in 1976. Source : [Trade Union Congress Library Collections](#), London Metropolitan University.



“Death by asphyxiation is horrible! The chemical workers’ union is looking out for you.” Poster from the Federación anarquista ibérica, 1937. Source : [International Federation of Libertarian Study and Documentation Centers](#).

The decades following the Second World War are frequently presented as the apex for union organizations in Europe. Not only was union membership at its highest, but the construction of systems characteristic of the welfare state enabled them to wield significant influence in economic and social life. Until the eve of the 1960s, the majority of union organizations adhered to the social consensus regarding the limitless nature of economic growth. This conviction served as the foundation for tacit support of the argument that productivity gains could lead to redistribution, which would gradually help reduce social inequality. Economic growth was thus seen as an instrument for improving the economic system with more socially just measures.

### **Rendering the ecological cost of “growth” visible in industrial territories**

The ecological cost of growth, which had long been ignored, became a concern for working classes exposed to the polluting activities that spread during the postwar period. Those years saw the formation of territories increasingly dedicated to industry, as well as the rise of metallurgical or mineral grinding industries (asbestos, graphite, etc.). While it provided fewer jobs than other expanding industrial sectors, the petrochemical industry was one of the most dynamic sectors in European economies.

Employees and their close relations were affected by fumes in companies, and were also exposed to the pollution that spread past factory walls. Initial protest was often expressed in the context of occupational relations, and led to three kinds of union demands: more robust application of occupational regulations; having the occupational origin of certain diseases recognized; and making sure union members were part of workers’ representative bodies monitoring pollution. During the 1960s, in the petrochemical factories of Lombardy (Italy) or the chemical corridor south of Lyon, the activities of unionists participating in workers’ representative bodies (especially in hygiene and

security committees in France) were decisive in collecting and diffusing information regarding industrial waste.

The increasing expertise of unionists gave them a central role in territorial mobilizations against industrial pollution. This approach led to the reinforcement of interprofessional organizations and trade unions which strove to intervene on the level of the territory rather than limiting their actions to a company. In France, the CFDT created “Basic Interprofessional Unions” (UIB), which emerged as actors that could generate consensus between the interests of employees and those of local residents.

### **The formation of expertise and the circulation of health-related knowledge**

By projecting themselves beyond the workplace in order to protect both the environment and human health, these organizations facilitated fruitful meetings with actors who were not employees, such as doctors and scientists. In the early 1960s, in the Farmitalia pharmaceutical factory in the suburbs of Turin, young sociologists and doctors conducted a study of working conditions. Over the years this approach was systematized within the Turin Chamber of Labor, where an ongoing dialogue was established between workers and doctors. The invention of this workers’ medicine sometimes went beyond the workplace, building knowledge regarding health among the local residents of the industries involved. More importantly, this Italian process spread and endured beyond the European space. In France, meetings between unionists and scientists could remain relatively informal, as could the relations between ergonomists and unionists within the CFDT and CGT. The same could be said of the exchanges between Professor Lorenzo Tomatis (the Director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer based in Lyon) and *cédétistes* (members of the CFDT) during the 1970s. These relations could also develop within more enduring organizations, such as the Toxic Products Group within the United Federation of Chemical Industries (FUC-CFDT), where union activists and researchers met regularly. They could also occur outside of unions, within associations specializing in these issues.

For workers’ representatives, these relations provided invaluable support, given that academics—who were part of transnational scientific networks—facilitated the circulation of expertise or knowledge produced in various countries. “Invisible transnational laboratories” provided training for researchers engaged in the fight against industrial diseases, such as Irving Selikoff, thereby making it possible to issue warnings, for example on the effects of asbestos. Books by researchers working in connection with unions were sometimes translated in multiple countries, helping raise awareness regarding the ecological cause. For example, *Che cos’è l’ecologia. Capitale, lavoro e ambiente* (What is ecology?) by Laura Conti (1977), a doctor and founder of the major Italian environmental association Legambiente, was translated into French in 1978. The diffusion of this information was also based on networks of international unionism. For example, the International Federation of Chemical Workers’ Unions (ICEM), and its leader Charles Levinson, played a major role in raising awareness among European unionists regarding the carcinogenic effects of vinyl chloride monomers, a substance that was characteristic of the growing petrochemical activity during the postwar period, as it was used to build tubes, textile materials, etc.

### **The role of unions in developing regulatory measures for industrial risks**

The combination of territorial mobilizations and scientific circulations ultimately fostered more rigorous regulation of industrial pollution, as well as changes to labor law and environmental law. In 1970, Italy adopted the Workers’ Statute, in which the principle of employee control over their work was strengthened. Two years later, the Regional Council of Lombardy formalized workplace medical services (SMAL), which ensured tight control over workers’ health, and could also study the health of local residents. In France, a number of decrees issued in the 1970s reinforced the remit of hygiene and safety committees.

This expanded competence of workers’ representative bodies was sometimes in keeping with the spirit of self-management present among certain parts of European unionism. For instance, activists from the Montedison de Castellanza (Lombardy) factory launched a *libretto sanitario*, which they presented as a tool for retracing the

occupational origin of diseases and for gathering statistics to shed light on the health effects of certain substances. This experience was replicated in Switzerland, as well as in some French petrochemical factories.

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While these forms of labor environmentalism eroded in the late 1970s, they attest to an emerging approach closely connecting social justice and environmental justice. By uniting the employees and local residents of polluting industries, challenging the belief in the virtuous nature of economic growth, and refusing to have the governing of pollution be based on financial compensation for harm, the unionists that recommended this approach also pleaded for emancipating union practices from the influence of Fordist compromise. This renewal was based on a firm defense of the sanctuarization of environmental protection and human health.

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