



Traditional histories of the environmental movement consider it to be a middle-class or upper-middle-class concern, removed from the grittier kitchen table issues of concern to working people. Not so, says Josiah Rector, [in an article in the new *Journal of American History*, entitled “Environmental Justice at Work: The UAW, the War on cancer, and the Right to Equal Protection from Toxic Hazards in Postwar America.”](#) [Here is the abstract:](#)

Josiah Rector analyzes a series of campaigns by midwestern autoworkers to secure stronger protections against cancer-causing chemicals after World War II. Although most historians of the environmental justice movement have neglected the contribution of labor unions, in the 1960s and 1970s, however, activists in unions and community organizations combined concerns about race, class, and gender inequality with related patterns of pollution exposure. In the process, these activists began to use popular epidemiology to link chemical exposures to disease. Emphasizing the role of working-class people in challenging pollution, Rector argues for a more inclusive history of the environmental justice movement.

Looks like an interesting and important read. Perhaps it overclaims a touch by saying that it wants a more inclusive history of the environmental justice movement: the entire point of the language of environmental *justice* is precisely to emphasize working-class connections. Still, the popular image of an “environmentalist” is someone concerned with spotted owls and wilderness far from human beings. It would be interesting to see how this image arose and how it has been maintained despite the fact that it bears no resemblance to contemporary environmentalism (and yes — right-wing media campaigns probably play a role, although not the only role). Indeed, much “environmental” policy can easily be reconceptualized as public health policy. In any event, Rector’s piece could be an important corrective, and is well worth investigating.