

GREENWIRE

The state of the green unions

Labor unions at some environmental groups are still negotiating their contracts years after organizing.



BY: **ROBIN BRAVENDER** | 09/05/2023 01:43 PM EDT



Green group organizers want to keep up momentum after a surge of unionizing in recent years. | POLITICO illustration/Images by iStock, Freepik

GREENWIRE | Years after a wave of union organizing swept through major U.S. green groups, workers inside influential environmental nonprofits are still feuding with their bosses as they attempt to hammer out their first union contracts.

Negotiations remain tense at major green groups, including the National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife and at Environment America's parent organization, the Public Interest Network, according to union organizers. Some organizations, like 350.org, Greenpeace and the Union of Concerned Scientists, are still working on first contracts, while others, such as the Center for Biological Diversity, Sunrise Movement and League of Conservation Voters, have settled agreements in place.

Labor leaders and workers inside green groups see this as a critical moment for the future of organizing within environmental nonprofits. They're hoping to maintain workers' enthusiasm for contract negotiations, even in groups where talks have been

lengthy and contentious. They're also building a network to provide more help to workers looking to unionize other environmental nonprofits after the rush in recent years has strained unions' resources.

"We're at a bit of a crossroads," said Danny Noonan, co-founder of the Breach Collective, an Oregon-based environmental nonprofit.

Following a "big rush in enthusiasm" to organize workplaces that was triggered partly by the pandemic, "securing a contract and maintaining enthusiasm and the momentum for the union through the bargaining process is proving quite difficult," Noonan said.

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— *CJ Garcia-Linz, president of the Progressive Workers Union that represents workers at Sierra Club, Greenpeace USA, 350.org, the Union of Concerned Scientists and Appalachian Voices.*

That's in part because management has more resources at their disposal, Noonan said, to "grind down" organizers and to resist contract provisions that workers are pushing for.

Some environmental group unions have experienced significant turnover in their ranks since they first organized due to layoffs, terminations and employees quitting. Several unions have filed complaints against green groups, accusing them of illegally firing union organizers.

Companies and organizations sometimes try to drag out negotiations with their unions, said David Zonderman, a labor history professor at North Carolina State University.

If management "can stonewall the first contract, they can often reduce support for the union," Zonderman said. If workers get discouraged, they might be willing to decertify the union, he said.

Nailing down a first contract is a big step, Zonderman said, in part because it establishes basic parameters that often stay in place well past the first contract and into subsequent versions.

Leaders of environmental groups say they're bargaining in good faith with union representatives and working to promote equity, fair pay and better working conditions inside their organizations.

But workers are frustrated that the organizing process hasn't gone more smoothly in environmental groups with progressive missions.

"Right now, everyone is in a place where we're disappointed to learn that the organization that we work for is not who they claim to be publicly," said CJ Garcia-Linz, president of the Progressive Workers Union that represents workers at Sierra Club, Greenpeace USA, 350.org, the Union of Concerned Scientists and the environmental group Appalachian Voices.

Some green groups and their workers have finalized collective bargaining agreements recently, including [Friends of the Earth](#) and the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), who announced contracts in July and August, respectively.

'Here to stay'

With an eye toward maintaining momentum and clinching contracts at groups where talks are ongoing, several green group organizers are launching a new initiative to share resources and help workers looking to start new unions at green groups and other nonprofits.

This fall, the Green Union Hall will offer a series of workshops featuring speakers with experience forming unions and navigating the bargaining process. The workshops are intended “for the union curious and those who are going through unionization for the first time to learn organizing skills, ask questions and build solidarity,” according to organizers.

“This movement is here to stay — it’s not going anywhere,” said Erica Prather, a former union organizer at the Defenders of Wildlife. Defenders [settled with an employee union](#) earlier this year after the union contended Prather was improperly fired due to her role as a union organizer.

Prather — along with Noonan of the Breach Collective, Garcia-Linz of the Progressive Workers Union and others — say the effort came out of a desire to share knowledge that organizers have gained across the environmental movement. The group’s first event, slated for Oct. 5, is a virtual panel discussion titled, “Why Your Nonprofit Needs a Union.” It’ll be open to the public, including managers, Prather said.

Cooperation across green groups has become increasingly important, Prather said, as parent unions have become overwhelmed by the amount of new nonprofits organizing and as workers aim to reshape environmental workplaces. “This is the future of the environmental movement,” Prather said.

One likely next move for organizers: turn up pressure on green group donors.

“I think that’s probably a next step ... trying to figure out how we as unionized workers and workplaces can start pressuring funders to not support organizations whose management is actively engaged in union busting or contracting with notorious union-defense firms,” Noonan said.

Organizers say they hope management at green groups would welcome the opportunity to work with unionized staff.

“We want people to stay in this work for a long time because we know there’s so much of this work to do,” said Mireille Bejjani, who helped organize the union at the Public Interest Network and left a few months after the union received voluntary recognition in 2022.

“We can’t afford to be burning people out and having them give up after a year or two because they’re in a miserable workplace environment,” Bejjani said.

Bargaining continues at Audubon

The unions formed within environmental groups are affiliated with a variety of different parent unions, including the Communications Workers of America, the Office and Professional Employees International Union, the Progressive Workers Union, and the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union.

Unions represented by CWA include those at the National Audubon Society, the Center for Biological Diversity, Sunrise Movement, the League of Conservation Voters and the newly formed union at the Natural Resources Defense Council. (Employees at E&E News and its parent company POLITICO unionized in 2021, joining NewsGuild-CWA.)

The Center for Biological Diversity and its union ratified their first contract in August, more than two years after staff unionized.

The Sunrise Movement and its staff union finalized their contract last September, when the group’s Executive Director [Varshini Prakash said she was](#) “so damn proud of this visionary collective bargaining agreement.”

The League of Conservation Voters’ union [announced in June](#) that bargaining was underway on a second contract after the first was finalized in 2020.

Staff at the Natural Resources Defense Council [announced a union in February](#), but union organizers did not respond to requests for comment about where the effort stands.

Mark Drajem, an NRDC spokesperson, said there had been “no update” since March and pointed again to a statement from NRDC President and CEO Manish Bapna, who said NRDC supports organized labor and respects employees’ “right to explore union representation.”

Some nonprofits have had a collaborative approach with their unions, said Moira Bulloch, a senior campaign communications coordinator with CWA. And a lot of environmental nonprofits, she said, “are seeing their values align with the values that their workers are bringing with their unions.”

One outlier, Bulloch said, is the National Audubon Society, which has “really fought their employees every step of the way.”

Audubon’s union and its management have been negotiating over a collective bargaining agreement for nearly two years. In July, [the union accused Audubon](#) of employing a “union-busting playbook” by offering enhanced benefits only to staff that weren’t part of the union.

After about 18 months of bargaining, Audubon’s union and management are just now getting to “the money talk,” including discussions about employee raises, said Shyamlee Patel, an Audubon employee and member of the Bird Union that represents staff. “We’ve been bargaining for ... almost 18 months,” Patel said, “and are just now getting to the nitty-gritty.”

The “vibe I get is not a willingness to negotiate and discuss, but first say ‘No,’” Patel said of management’s approach.

Maxine Griffin Somerville, chief people and culture officer at Audubon, said the organization continues “to make progress with the Union” and has reached tentative agreements on a number of issues so far. “We are committed to continuing our positive conversations and believe a productive relationship with the Union will strengthen Audubon.”

Stuck: Defenders of Wildlife, Environment America

Workers at Defenders of Wildlife and the Public Interest Network — which includes Environment America — also describe their ongoing bargaining process as contentious. Both of those employee unions are affiliated with the Office and Professional Employees International Union.

Defenders staff unionized in the summer of 2021. Earlier this year, the union filed [unfair labor practice allegations](#) with the National Labor Relations Board following layoffs at that conservation group.

“Overall, my opinion is that the state of labor relations at Defenders is very poor and continues to this day,” said Sascha Eisner, OPEIU’s chief negotiator at Defenders. Eisner pointed to the unfair labor practice charges, layoffs and the pace of contract negotiations.

Defenders spokesperson Laura Sheehan said the group is “continuing to work in good faith with the Union towards a final collective bargaining agreement that supports our workforce and enables Defenders of Wildlife’s critical conservation mission.”

The staff union at the Public Interest Network has seen contract negotiations stall with management during their recent talks, said Zach Barber, an organizer with the union.

The union and management at the Public Interest Network have found common ground on some issues, Barber said. They reached a tentative agreement, he said, to end the policy of staffers being forced to share beds during work-funded travel.

“Countless staff have shared stories about experiences sharing beds that border on sexual harassment, not to mention making many people feel unsafe or uncomfortable for a multitude of reasons,” the union [posted last year on X](#), the social media site formerly called Twitter.

The union has also filed complaints of unfair labor practices against the Public Interest Network, including challenging the terminations of union leaders.

Environment America President Wendy Wendlandt said in a statement that both sides are “waiting to find out if the investigating agent agrees with our opinion that these charges are groundless.”

Pay remains a key sticking point in the negotiations.

“When we first polled the bargaining unit, a large majority said they'd had to rely on help from family to cover expenses,” Barber said. “We're concerned about the lack of diversity on staff — which skews heavily white and from wealth, compared to the public.”

Entry-level staff who work an average 50-hour week in cities including Boston, Los Angeles or Washington, earn between \$35,750 and \$48,175, Wendlandt said. “We think these are appropriate nonprofit salaries,” she added. “We are continuing to bargain with the union on this, but we remain far apart on economic issues.”

Wendlandt said the organization has “negotiated in good faith” since the union was voluntarily recognized by management and certified. “We are working to reach an agreement that is in line with our values, including the thoughtful use of our members’ and contributors’ money in advancing our mission to protect our air, water and open spaces.”

Negotiating

Sierra Club workers and management are set to head back to the bargaining table this fall to renegotiate their union contract, said Garcia-Linz, who expects those talks to be challenging.

Sierra Club’s employee union filed [a complaint with labor regulators](#) earlier this year alleging that the green group violated the law when it laid off staff.

Sierra Club spokesperson Jonathon Berman said the group will “continue negotiating in good faith” as union talks proceed.

“We will continue our focus on establishing sound fiscal and organizational management of the Sierra Club,” Berman said. “The status quo was unsustainable, and we are proud that through restructuring we have begun repositioning the Sierra Club for growth.”

Workers at 350.org, Greenpeace and the Union of Concerned Scientists — other groups whose employees are represented by the Progressive Workers Union — are still working to finalize their first contracts.

Contract negotiations are “close” at 350.org, Garcia-Linz said, adding that UCS is “incredibly far away” and Greenpeace is “moving a little bit slower now that they're getting to the financial stuff.”

Across environmental organizations, common sticking points include pay and benefits, Garcia-Linz said.

At 350.org, the board and U.S. staff are in the final stages of ratifying a collective bargaining agreement, said Executive Director May Boeve.

“We firmly believe that workers rights are central to the climate justice movement,” Boeve said in a statement. “Unionization is a central component of this, and we fully support the right of our staff and workers worldwide to unionize. We are committed to creating a workplace in which all staff are treated with dignity and respect, seeking to embed justice and equity into everything we do.”

Officials at UCS and Greenpeace USA declined to discuss specifics of ongoing contract negotiations.

“We strongly support our employees’ right to form a union and are in favor of fair and equitable wages, hours and working conditions,” said Seto Akinjiola, chief people officer

at UCS. “Bargaining in good faith and achieving a fair contract that supports an equitable and inclusive workplace can absolutely strengthen an organization.”

Jerilyn Johnson, chief people and culture officer at Greenpeace USA, said in an email, “We believe that the collective bargaining negotiations will lead to a stronger Greenpeace USA. While we can’t comment in detail given that negotiations are still in progress, we look forward to getting a contract in place.”

Like Friends of the Earth, employees at Food & Water Watch organized under the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union. Food & Water Watch and its union finalized their first contract last November.

There’s still plenty of interest in organizing unions within nonprofits after the surge in 2020 and 2021, said Katie Barrows of the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union.

“We get leads every day,” Barrows said.



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