

Logistics Landscapes: Green Growth and Just Transition Politics at the Port of Oakland

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A container yard at the Port of Oakland, with the Oakland skyline and East Bay hills in the background. Image source: Port of Oakland.

Abstract

In the US and globally, climate change policy and discourse have decisively turned towards a green growth paradigm, which asserts a strong complementarity between environmental sustainability and economic growth. While critiques of green growth *qua* green capitalist system have challenged whether it is possible to retain market-based mechanisms' growth orientation without the social and environmental harms they have previously wrought, we understand less about how really existing green growth projects became politically possible and what their effects are for implicated workforces and communities. Analyzing the regional politics of decarbonization around the Port of Oakland, this paper argues that the Port's decarbonization program operates under a green growth bargain. I explain how this bargain became politically viable by tracing two historical arcs dating to the 1950s, one following the labor relations of longshoring and the other the environmental relations of Oakland's urban development. I show that these arcs were both driven by the political economic incentives of regional development and global logistics, but that despite this they unfolded in apparent separation until the late 1990s, when a working-class environmental justice movement emerged that constructed port growth as a problem, thereby explicitly articulating environmental and labor politics. This paper adds to eco-Marxist and social movement theories of collective climate politics by showing how histories of contention condition political opportunities and strategic decision-making.

Introduction

Presently, seaports across the country – but especially in California, due to additional state-level subsidies and regulations – are in a moment of decarbonization. The Port of Oakland's flagship initiative is its \$322 million, Inflation Reduction Act-funded Clean Ports project to replace its fleets of diesel cranes, tractors, and semitrucks with zero emissions alternatives. Yet it remains to be seen how this transition will impact workers operating the machinery, residents living under the Port's pollution burden, businesses operating at the Port, and the Port Authority itself. *This paper explores how Oakland's decarbonization program emerged historically and what political bargain undergirds it.* I argue that the Port's decarbonization program operates under a *green growth bargain*, based upon a contested compromise around the twinned goals of greening, understood as mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and environmental health risks for fence-line communities, and growth, understood as maintaining a globally competitive port. Responding to the “jobs versus environment” dilemma (Obach 2004; Räthzel and Uzzell 2011), green growth asserts a strong complementarity between environmental sustainability and economic growth, arguing that well-designed policy can stimulate employment and market growth in the construction of a carbon-free society (Bowen and Fankhauser 2011; Meckling and Allan 2020; Nogué-Algueró 2020). The Port's larger environmental commitments, including specific decarbonization projects like Clean Ports, evince these defining green growth characteristics as they attempt to narratively and technologically thread the needle of port cargo growth and pollution mitigation. To analyze the political conditions of possibility for this green growth bargain, this paper traces two political historical arcs and demonstrates how these histories have shaped the form of decarbonization politics around the Port today.

The first follows the *mechanization of port labor*, beginning with the 1960 Mechanization & Modernization (M&M) Agreement signed by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the employers' association known as the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) (Fairley 1961, 1979). The Agreement overturned a nearly three-decades old

labor relations regime in which the union had exerted vast control over the organization of the labor process, clearing the way for the introduction of the standardized shipping container and the development of the modern, competitive global shipping system (Finlay 1988; Johnston 2024; Kimeldorf 1988; Levinson 2006). The M&M inaugurated a continued process of port productivity maximization through mechanization. Neoliberal deregulation of the transportation sector in the 1980s intensified this trend, as it enabled intermodal transport (i.e., goods movement across multiple modes of transport coordinated by a single firm) such that ports could no longer rely as much on their geographic catchment areas for steady cargo flows (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Cowen 2014; Talley 2000). Ports became competitors, striving to provide the most efficient turnaround times for ships and connections for outbound truck and rail, requiring regular modernization and expansion (Jaffee 2010). Since the M&M, union longshoremen have dealt with this efficiency drive by trading consent for the intensification and routinization of their work for increasing pay and benefits. This is an arc of mechanization for remuneration that continues today, as longshore unions nationally and globally determine how to respond to container terminal automation (Bottalico 2022; Justie et al. 2023; Press and Schlarb 2022).

The second arc follows the *urban growth machine* dynamics through which racial and class power enabled the redevelopment of the West Oakland neighborhood surrounding the Port, in service of economic growth through the transportation sector. Logan and Molotch ([1987] 2007) theorize urban development as governed by growth machine contests between use-value and exchange-value orientations to land, where real estate interests and city officials pursue an exchange-value interest in maximizing the profit produced from a parcel against the use-value interest of communities seeking places to reside and recreate. An urban growth machine is evident in the post-World War II development of West Oakland, a neighborhood historically populated by Black and diverse international migrants, as the city attempted to leverage its port as an engine for economic development (Madrigal 2025; Schwarzer 2022; Self 2003). From the 1950s-1970s, West Oakland saw the construction of three new interstate freeways encircling the neighborhood and two new container terminals at the Port, in the process demolishing thousands of homes and reorienting a residential neighborhood towards the transportation needs of the booming Port. Just as the efficiency imperative has driven continued mechanization of port labor, it has also driven a cycle of continued port growth. The post-war expansion was followed by the turn-of-the-century “Vision 2000” project that constructed new berths and a rail terminal designed for intermodalism (Gulick 2002). This persistent intensification of port activity, bringing in thousands of trucks and other diesel-burning vehicles like freight locomotives and container ships, explains why port communities face highly disproportionate pollution burdens (Greenberg 2021).¹

As these brief accounts reveal, both the labor politics of port mechanization and the environmental politics of Oakland’s urban development follow from the competitive, growth-

¹ In West Oakland, every census tract is above the state median of pollution burden, with the most polluted census tract in the 89th percentile, as measured by the California Environmental Protection Agency. Life expectancy in the neighborhood is 7.5 years lower than for Alameda County, with drastically higher rates of asthma hospitalizations, heart disease, cancer, and stroke. These morbidity data are also to do with the socioeconomic profile of the neighborhood, where 52% residents are below the poverty line, 76% are non-white, and 42% are Black (Bay Area Air Quality Management District and West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project 2019). This intersection of pollution burden and socioeconomic disadvantage makes West Oakland a paradigmatic environmental justice community.

oriented logic of global logistics. Nevertheless, I argue that these arcs proceeded in apparent separation until the late 1990s, when a working-class environmental justice movement emerged in West Oakland in response to the Vision 2000 port expansion project (Gulick 2002). With earlier political experiences rooted in community activism following the collapse of the Cypress Freeway during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, groups like West Oakland Neighbors (WON) mobilized for constraints to be instituted around the Port's expansionary ambitions. By constructing port growth as a problem, this movement *articulated*, in the Gramscian-Hallian double sense of "joining together" and "giving expression to" (Hart 2002:28, 309; see also Leeds 2024; Levenson 2022), the labor politics of port mechanization and the environmental politics of the urban growth machine. This articulated field has been the terrain for subsequent environmental-labor politics at the Port, including the campaign against a proposed coal export terminal that began in 2015 (No Coal in Oakland n.d.) and the Port's current decarbonization program, led by its Clean Ports project.

This paper traces these entangled histories of mechanization and urban growth in order to map how this shared physical and social landscape has positioned the key stakeholders in today's decarbonization politics. In particular, I argue that it has brought five key actors groups – state agencies including the Port Authority and air regulators, businesses like marine terminal operators, port labor unions, local environmental justice groups, and expert non-profits – together in a green growth bargain, through which uneasy tradeoffs are negotiated between the economic demand for growth and the environmental demands of public health and climate change mitigation.

Methodological Approach

This paper, focused on tracing an approximately 70-year historical period from the 1950s to the 2020s, relies primarily on historical materials and secondary literature. For the labor relations arc, I draw from the substantial scholarly (Alimahomed-Wilson 2016; Cole 2018; Finlay 1988; Johnston 2024; Kimeldorf 1988; Wellman 1995), as well as organic (Waterfront Writers and Artists 1980; Weir 1973), literature on the ILWU to synthesize a longer arc that novelly connects the mechanization struggles of the past to today's decarbonization politics. I also draw primary historical materials from the ILWU's digital and San Francisco-based archives and from the Waterfront Writers and Artists Archive at UC Berkeley. These materials include oral histories, editions of "The Dispatcher" newspaper, and internal reports and meeting minutes. For the environmental arc, I draw from the secondary literature on Oakland's urban history (Gulick 2002; Madrigal 2025; Schwarzer 2022; Self 2003), as well as primary historical materials: meeting minutes and attached reports from the Port of Oakland's Board of Commissioners, local news coverage and city documents from the Oakland History Center, and social movement materials like the No Coal in Oakland digital archive. I use these data, as well retrospective components of in-depth interviews I am conducting with individuals across the five actor groups I argue are currently engaged in the Port's decarbonization politics, to construct a historical narrative that reveals the political conditions of possibility for the present-day green growth bargain.

Anticipated Contributions: Articulation Politics in the Environmental-Labor Field

This research historically documents the integration of environmental and labor political fields through their embedding in a shared, higher order political economy, a step that advances the

“environmentalization” (Angelo and Greenberg 2023) of labor and political sociology and helps connect often disconnected literatures on just transitions and environmental justice (Snell 2021; Wang and Lo 2021). In doing so, it applies the political theories of Gramsci, Hall, and their interpreters to elaborate more objectivist eco-Marxist and rationalist social movement theories.

I conceptualize tracing the histories of environmental-labor politics as an analysis of the “historical determination” of the political subjectivities presently engaged in the green growth bargain (Hart 2002; Levenson 2022). By historical determination, I mean how political subjectivities and strategies emerge from the intertwining effects of historical experiences in definite material circumstances. This occurs through processes of articulation, which both give name to and interpretively interconnect experienced social problems (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015; Hall 1980; Hart 2007; Leeds 2024), as illustrated by community activists’ articulation of environmental and labor politics through the construction of growth as a problem. Focusing on the historical development of political agency and culture adds, complementarily, to more objectivist and rationalist theories of collective politics in the green energy transition. Strategic orientations of stakeholders in the Port’s energy transition, including community environmental justice organizations and labor unions representing the Port’s workforce, follow not just from objective contradictions in how capitalism appropriates the non-human environment (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2004; Huber 2022; O’Connor 1998; Schnaiberg 1980), nor only from sectoral analyses of interests or a power-maximizing rationality (Kalt 2022; Sicotte 2025; Thomas and Doerflinger 2020). These objective interests and strategic rationalities *are* operative, but they are suffused with historically determined ideological inclinations and disinclinations.

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