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What if environmental damage is a form of capitalist sabotage?

Worker sabotage is a weapon of the weak, but capitalist sabotage causes much greater damage



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A recent study in the journal Nature estimates that the current carbon emission rates from fossil fuels like coal and oil will cause 83 million deaths between now and 2100. That's more than 1 million deaths per year as a direct result of rising carbon emissions. This number does not include harmful diseases caused by, for instance, water supplies tainted by crude oil, as we saw in Henderson, Tenn., last summer.

Early-20th-century-American radicals had an explanation for this sort of damage: "capitalist sabotage." The term described destructive practices in the service of profit that are often treated as the mere unintended consequences of doing business. Determining culpability for rising temperatures, ever-expanding ocean garbage patches and raging wildfires is difficult. But capitalist sabotage offers a way to think about environmental destruction that neither exonerates bad actors for lack of clear culpability, nor lapses into conspiracies. It assigns blame for the harm that is done, knowingly, by a whole class of people who have common interests.

Sabotage, now associated with military intrigue and commonly used as a synonym for “undermine,” was first used in France to describe the intentional destruction of employer property by workers. The first to popularize the word “sabotage” in the United States were members of the radical labor union the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW was founded in 1905 by a group of American labor organizers disillusioned with the limited, and often racist and elitist, politics of craft unions such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The IWW saw the traditional organization of workers sorted into individual trades within an industry as a system that encouraged competition. Organizing all workers into “one big union” eliminated competition between crafts while allowing for the inclusion of “unskilled labor,” which meant welcoming women, immigrants and African Americans who had been shut out of the skilled trades.

Organizing laborers, regardless of skill, sex or race, was not only about strength in numbers. The IWW also incorporated American traditions of mutual aid, socialism and philosophical anarchism, ideas seen as radical and demonized as “alien” in the early-20th century.

A 1916 pamphlet by IWW organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn defined sabotage broadly as “the withdrawal of efficiency.” For workers, this could include everything from slowdowns to the destruction of finished products. Whatever the act, it had to be “conscious” and intentional, not mere vandalism; it had to result in depleted profits or disrupted production; and it could not threaten the life or physical well-being of people.

The French labor leader Emile Pouget identified two types of sabotage that the IWW incorporated into its literature: worker sabotage and capitalist sabotage. Worker sabotage was “aimed only at the means of exploitation,” such as machines and other “inert lifeless things.” Workers engaged in sabotage for the same reason that they went on strike — as a way to exert real power in a very unfair fight.

Damaging or temporarily disabling machinery prevented replacement workers — often brought in trains and escorted into factories by armed guards — from resuming production while workers were on strike.

Unlike worker sabotage — a weapon of the weak aimed at leveraging power by controlling inanimate property — capitalist sabotage, Pouget said, “reaps human victims and deprives men of their health” to increase profits. Industrialists supplied warships with cracked boilers, they imported bad meat and made poisonous fertilizer.

Along with many harmful practices, owners and managers failed to maintain safe workplaces because to do so ate into profits. Mine collapses and other “accidents” killed tens of thousands of people every year and maimed many more. The owners of industry had an interest in increasing profits and so chose not spend money on maintenance or to let workers work at safe speeds. As the IWW leader William “Big Bill” Haywood put it, “human life is cheaper [than safety measures]. Therefore, they continue to murder us by the thousands every year.”

In the early-20th century, the economist Thorstein Veblen argued that sabotage was endemic to capitalist industry: “Whether employed by the workmen to enforce their claims, or by the employers to defeat their employees,” sabotage is “part of the ordinary conduct of industry under the existing system.” But, in Veblen’s view, it was capitalist sabotage — with the support of the state — that did far more damage to society than worker sabotage.

Often the state intervened against worker radicalism on behalf of industry. This included the use of the military to protect employer property, U.S. courts that consistently ruled against individual workers, and government legislation that targeted radicals, including the Espionage Act passed during World War I.

World War I had been a moment of gathering strength for the labor movement. The IWW had particular success organizing lumber workers in the Northwest. Lumber was an industry critical to the U.S. war effort, which gave workers leverage.

Along with a surge in radical labor activity, however, was a surge of jingoism and wartime expectations of “100% Americanism.” Enacted in 1917 to counter wartime dissent of all kinds, the Espionage Act both reflected and buoyed public fears of labor radicals and foreigners and enabled the prosecution of the IWW leadership.

In 1918, 109 members of the IWW were found guilty on five counts of conspiracy under the Espionage Act. Neither the organization nor the individual members could be shown to have done anything beyond advocating sabotage in print and speech, but their recent successes in labor organizing and the political climate of the time made it possible to convict them. Following the federal trial, any states where the IWW still had a presence passed laws that made it impossible for them to operate without serious legal consequences.

Years later, in 1935, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed as a new alternative to the still powerful AFL. The CIO was left-leaning, and worker sabotage continued to happen, but it was no longer named and encouraged by any major labor or political organization. The word “sabotage” had effectively been made illegal.

Yet it is worth revisiting the term and its meaning today.

As environmental activists and ordinary citizens grapple with the dire effects of climate change, and political leaders offer weak and inadequate solutions, some people have begun to consider more radical tactics including sabotage, typically in the form of property destruction against fossil fuel infrastructure.

For its advocates, this sort of eco-sabotage has the advantage of bypassing lengthy, often ineffective, legal procedures. But for eco-sabotage’s detractors, burning logging equipment or shutting off a pipeline is simply unprincipled vandalism. The meaning of eco-sabotage is currently a matter of public debate.

Meanwhile, oil leaks, wild fires, failed crops and dead fisheries caused by corporate pollution are rarely called what they are: *property destruction*. Borrowing the theories of sabotage being debated a century ago can help us see how the quest for profit can be destructive, and to recognize that capitalists — whether negligent or willful — are engaging in this practice for profit. The term “capitalist sabotage” is a potent reminder that not all property destruction is created equal or punished equally.

Following the Dakota Access pipeline protests in 2016 and 2017, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) drafted model legislation to enhance and streamline sentencing of anyone involved in sabotaging energy industry equipment. The law, passed in Iowa, created a new crime called “critical infrastructure sabotage.” It is clear from the bill’s language that it not only concerns the physical integrity of the pipeline. It enables the prosecution of anyone who gathers to protest the building or operation of “critical infrastructure.” In the name of protecting property, the Iowa law threatens First Amendment rights.

If something like the Iowa law gets passed at the federal level, protest itself — all of the nonviolent alternatives to direct action and property destruction — will become illegal. Meanwhile, the real saboteurs — the capitalists contributing to climate change — will continue to go about unrecognized and unpunished.