

Kathryn “Kate” Bartholomew

Responses to Progressive Workers Union’s Sierra Club Board Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Questions:

Why are you running for Sierra Club Board of Directors? List your qualifications and reasons for seeking to be elected.

Your answer”

Being volunteer driven, imbues the Club with the agility, flexibility and power necessary to tackle the interdependent devastation and complexity of Climate Disruption, systemic racism and exploitation of the natural world, other species and one another by systems designed to maintain the power of a few over the many.

I’ve spent a career as a dedicated “deconstructionist,” working to dismantle structures of oppression and violence to living beings and ecosystems wherever I see them. I believe in the basic rights of all people to life, liberty, clean water, clean air, healthy food and the space to be heard. I also believe in the necessity for candor, transparency, clarity, humility and access in any decision-making process. This is especially crucial in grassroots organizations.

Atlantic Chapter Chair (2018 — present); Atlantic Chapter Conservation Co-Chair (2016 — 2018); Atlantic Chapter CCL Delegate (6/2016 — 2/2018); Nuclear Free CORE Team (2018 — present); Atlantic Chapter At-Large ExCom Delegate (2/2012 — 2/2018; 1/2022 — present); Atlantic Chapter Finger Lakes Group ExCom Delegate (2/2009 — 2/2012; 2/2018 — 1/2022); Finger Lakes Group Chair (2009 — 2018).

Chair of the Schuyler County Environmental Management Council (2005 — present); member of the Schuyler County Planning Commission (2013 — 2016); environmental representative on the Southern Tier Central Regional Planning and Development Board (2012 — 2014); President Watkins Glen Faculty Association (2012 — 2014); member of the Board of Directors of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Schuyler County [NY] (2009 — 2014); member of the Board of Directors of Community Dispute Resolution Center of Tompkins, Chemung and Schuyler Counties [NY] (focus on transformative mediation & restorative justice) (2009 — 2014).

What is your experience supporting unions, workers rights, or economic justice? Please detail your involvement and solidarity efforts.

Your answer:

I am a retired public school teacher; a member of NYSUT. I am former President of my school district's Teachers Association and was involved in negotiation Collective Bargaining Agreements, filing contract grievances and working through labor/management disputes. I am the daughter of two life-long union members: my mother was a public school teacher and my father was a heavy equipment operator, a member of the International Union of Operation Engineers. The AFLCIO sponsored the National Merit Scholarship that paid for my undergraduate degree.

But more importantly, I know that there are many different forms of effective bargaining and negotiating structures, not all of which are adversarial, and many of which can be much more empowering to labor than others.

What organizational change or actions would you propose and support to improve the work lives of Sierra Club workers?

Your answer:

I recognize there is now a Restorative Accountability process in place, but I also think there should be some collaboration training for staff and volunteer grassroots leaders to promote better cooperative working relationships, increase transparency in communication, reduce siloing and distrust, and form more seamless integration on all levels of our work. It is much harder for toxicity to fester in the broad light of day when all the doors and windows are open.

If elected, what could you as a Board member do to ensure PWU has a role in decisions that impact Sierra Club workers ?

Your answer:

Any committee, task force, working group or other assigned body with instructions to study or devise changes in the organization should have a PWU representative among its members. And that person should have just as much voice as every other person in the group.

I don't know if your CBA has a grievance procedure or a labor management committee, but it should, and failures to be involved in decision-making would be issues brought to either of these vehicles.:

Where do you see Sierra Club's role in addressing social and economic inequality, including gender and racial disparities?

Your answer:

I see Environmental Justice as Social Justice — they are two aspects of the same gargantuan monolith of harm that needs to be undone. But it is a process that begins with the individual, moves outward within the group, then the organization, then the communities and finally the world. To think it will all happen immediately, or without glitches, after millennia of accumulation, is not realistic. We must make our best efforts daily to bring harms to light and address them — but we also must remember compassion, given the insidious nature of so much of what we are deconstructing and how embedded it is in the collective psyche — some folks are more “awake” than others.

What in your experience demonstrates your ability to speak truth to power even if it carries risk or might be unpopular?

Your answer:

As a public secondary school science teacher in a semi-conservative, rural school district, I fought along with a group of students to have an LGBTQ+ school club officially recognized by the School Board. At first the school board insisted the club had to be a “diversity club” that embraced other groups subject to potential harassment — BIPOC students, physically and/or emotionally challenged, etc. —which wasn't inherently negative — except the board failed to understand how silenced the voices of the LGBTQ+ students had been for so long. Finally, after 5 years and concerted effort, the club was transitioned to a student-run Gay Straight Alliance, and I served as nominal advisor on paper.

What priorities would you bring to the Sierra Club Board?

Your answer:

1.) Honesty. 2.) The need for openness and transparency in decision making. 3.) The importance of listening deeply and hearing all voices equally. 4.) The importance of including the Buddhist concept of Compassion along with Equity and Justice. 5.) The imperative of focusing above all else on the juggernaut of Climate Disruption, because if that I'd not dealt with, all else is moot.

Are there any other comments you would like to make to inform our 400+ members?

Your answer:

It seems to me that we need to work on coalescing in solidarity — staff and grassroots volunteers — rather than allowing ourselves to be siloed by management. If we can work to communicate openly, collaborate and coordinate cooperatively, and embrace flexibility and nuance (as we work on every day in the Atlantic Chapter), we can be exponentially stronger together. Nothing is absolutely perfect, but it can get damn close. Forward in solidarity.