

WE CAN HAVE JOBS AND A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT

by John Cartwright,

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A lot of other folks knew that a while ago -- more than 100,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in the GTA over the last five years, even before the market meltdown. That's why we need people who will fight to defend Canadian jobs today.

But we also need to learn some lessons and ensure we benefit from the future economy -- and green jobs will be a major part of it. A decade ago the world's leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro to take stock of the environmental crisis created by pollution, deforestation and climate change. Their concerns led to the creation of the Kyoto protocol on the reduction of greenhouse gases.

Corporate voices immediately cried about economic costs in an effort to sabotage the accord. Their rhetoric about "job-killing" has a familiar ring -- they have used it to oppose any kind of policy that restricts their ability to exploit man or nature. But it turns out the emperors of self-regulation aren't wearing many clothes these days. Instead, it's time to recognize we can have both jobs and a healthier environment.

Green jobs can include everything from restoring forests and wetlands, to building low-emission vehicles, to teaching children how to be environmentally responsible. We have some hands-on experience in creating real green-collar jobs right here in Toronto. The construction trades actively pursued work in retrofitting buildings as a way to provide jobs for their members during the bleak days of the '90s recession. Through the city's Better Buildings Partnership, hundreds of jobs were created, while building owners saved 30-50% on utility and energy costs, and CO2 emissions were significantly reduced. They laughed when people first talked about deep lake water cooling for office towers -- yet today it's seen as a clear economic advantage.

PROPOSAL IGNORED

Some years ago CUPE and the Toronto Environmental Alliance co-sponsored a proposal for recycling and composting that would have diverted 72% of Toronto's solid waste from landfills, and created 900 new jobs. It was ignored until the Adams Mine fiasco, when it finally became the basis for the city's Task Force 2010 report. Today homeowners have widely embraced using the green bin, confounding the conservative naysayers.

Perhaps the most inspiring example right now is the Blue-Green Alliance in the U.S., headed up by Steelworker Dave Foster. Its efforts helped create hundreds of new jobs in Pennsylvania by tying energy policy into local production of wind turbines. At their recent conference entitled "Good Jobs, Green Jobs," corporate executives, environmentalists and union leaders agreed we all need to embrace the environmental imperatives of the new economy.

In contrast to that success, Ontario just imported a whack of windmills from Denmark to plant on the shores of Lake Erie. No requirement that new production facilities to be located here. Rebuilding our economy into a sustainable one can create good jobs in every sector. From resource extraction to public transit. From redesigning industrial processes that "close the loop" to different crops and food production. From water treatment to demand side management for electricity. The list goes on and on.

It benefits the public sector, by making facilities and services more cost effective. It includes making our private sector industries more capable of surviving the future challenges as resources shrink and pollution is curtailed. And it will begin to unleash the tremendous economic potential of environmental technologies. Can we bring all of these ideas together and create momentum towards real alternatives? Decades ago social movements pushed the political agenda for change, and millions of people refused to accept the power structure as it stood.

A new "green" world view could help to inspire the same kind of passion and commitment that are required to deal with the current crisis. And it could give young people something truly positive to believe in. How about jobs and justice -- interlinked with saving our planet for future generations.