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How Green Is Your Collar?

by JEREMY BRECHER, TIM COSTELLO & BRENDAN SMITH

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As cities and states from New York to California to Minnesota race to invent policies to address global warming, new mandates for investment in green energy will produce many billions of investment dollars. In the short run, the Bush Administration stands in the way, but major federal legislation this year or next is almost a foregone conclusion--and the carbon market it will establish will generate hundreds of billions of dollars a year and create thousands, even millions, of new jobs. But the realities of how Americans will work and what jobs they will have in a green future are only beginning to be addressed.

Nearly 1,000 trade unionists, environmentalists, green businesspeople, political leaders and allies came together recently in Pittsburgh to explore these issues at the first annual conference on "[Good Jobs, Green Jobs](#)," sponsored by the Blue-Green Alliance of the United Steelworkers Union and the Sierra Club.

It has taken labor a long time to address the threat of global warming--the AFL-CIO even lobbied against the Kyoto Protocol. It doesn't help when environmentalists don't stand up to insist on protecting workers from the pain that may accompany environmental protections. But all that may be changing. For example, the AFL-CIO Executive Council issued a statement March 4 on "greening the economy" that said, "It is time for our nation to take bold steps to meet the 21st century challenges related to climate change."

There are both risks and opportunities for labor in the shift to a green economy. For coal miners, for example, restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions might mean real job losses, and many environmentalists are deeply concerned by the insistence by some union leaders on continuing a coal-based economy. But for Midwestern steelworkers, the building of parts for wind turbines is already a source of thousands of jobs.

There is a growing consensus that greening will on aggregate produce more jobs, but they are likely to be spread across a wide range of occupations and industries. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Teamsters sent significant delegations to the conference but didn't call attention to jobs that are threatened or those likely to expand as a result of new climate change policies. Indeed, the conference focused more on the overall implications of those policies than on their consequences for particular unions. Marianne McMullen, SEIU communications director, told the conference that in

years to come, "The environmental movement may be the only movement" as different groups come together to build a new economy.

But session after session at this conference produced pointed questions, the answers to which could help define meaningful strategies for labor unions and environmentalists to tackle the climate change crisis. Here's a sample:

What Are Green Jobs?

As Blue-Green Alliance executive director David Foster noted in his opening remarks, green jobs are about "both product and process." They include jobs that produce low-carbon energy, such as solar and wind power. But they are also jobs that perform any kind of work in a way that reduces greenhouse gas emissions: a job on a farm that uses less fertilizer or in a steel plant that uses less electricity would also be green. And most green jobs will look a lot like the old jobs, because that's what they are: welders fabricating windmill parts, HVAC mechanics retrofitting heating systems, construction workers building energy-efficient buildings. Each is using old skills in green ways.

Public or Private?

Many speakers cited *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's call for a "[Green New Deal](#)." But Friedman hastens to say that it should be one in which the government's role is "not funding projects, as in the original New Deal, but seeding basic research, providing loan guarantees where needed and setting standards, taxes and incentives" that will stimulate the private sector to produce "clean power." Many businesspeople at the conference echoed this view. But other participants saw the global warming catastrophe as a sign of the failure of markets. They argued that it required not just market solutions but large public investments and mandatory plans to reduce greenhouse gases.

Will the Poor Be Left Behind?

[Van Jones](#) of Green for All noted that the "old" industrial economy and its decline stranded a large underclass of poor people. He called for a "green wave" that can "lift all boats." He described programs like the Oakland Green Jobs Corps and Solar Richmond, which are involving the most underprivileged urban youth in weatherization and solar panel installation, thereby creating a "green pathway out of poverty." But he raised the concern that the new green economy might, like the old industrial economy, exclude the poor unless measures are taken to ensure that green jobs go to those who need them most.

Will Green Jobs Be Good Jobs?

The number of green jobs might radically increase, but the result might be little more than a green-collar sweatshop. As Michael Peck of the wind turbine manufacturer Gamesa USA, put it, "Green must mean job quality and wages." He proposed including the Apollo Alliance's green economy principles as job standards for public investments and subsidies, in the same way that public support now often requires meeting LEED

(Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and other environmental standards for new buildings.

Will Green Jobs Be Union Jobs?

To win labor support, the push for green jobs will have to provide, if not guaranteed unionization, at least a guarantee of labor rights. Writer and former National Writers Union president Jonathan Tasini, blogging about the conference, complained, "Environmentalists and other policy folks have gotten the lingo down about 'high-wage, good-paying' jobs, but they still don't seem to be able to use the word 'union' consistently." He praised as an exception one speaker who said that green jobs generated with public monies have to include commitments of neutrality in union recognition campaigns.

Who Will Bear the Burden of Climate Change Policies?

Organized labor worldwide has called for a "just transition" to a low- carbon economy that will not place the burden of change on those who have the misfortune of working in industries that must undergo "green downsizing." So far little has been done, or even planned, to take care of those like coal miners and power plant workers, who may lose their jobs as a direct effect of efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. Not surprisingly, some of these constituencies and their unions have been among the most outspoken opponents of policies to address global warming.

If carbon trading and/or carbon taxes raise the cost of energy, how will it affect those who already cannot afford to heat their houses or get to work? SEIU's Marianne McMullen expressed a "visceral reaction to lifestyle environmentalism" that demands consumers pay more for green products--such as energy-efficient light bulbs--when many low-income workers are barely able to make ends meet. And she pointed out that managers are likely to take advantage of environmental pressures to cut or speed up jobs: when recycling receptacles were introduced in offices, janitors often had to empty twice as many bins in the same time for the same pay.

How Will the Emerging Economic Crisis Affect Green Jobs?

The emerging recession will generate pressure for public jobs programs, and jobs fighting global warming could be a high priority. But the recession will also throw governments at every level into fiscal crisis. There was a move in Congress to add investment in green jobs to the recent economic stimulus package; it was defeated, but it could rise again as part of additional stimulus measures that are already being proposed. At the conference, Sierra Club executive director Carl Pope argued that any federal intervention into the mortgage crisis should require and provide capital for retrofitting the affected homes. "We need to make sure that as we clean up the mortgage mess, we also clean up the energy mess," because both will drive people out of their homes.

Will Carbon Reduction Drive Jobs Abroad?

Labor's concern that climate change policy might accelerate corporate- led globalization was evident throughout the conference. According to Marco Trbovich, assistant to Steelworkers president Leo Girard, the Lieberman-Warner bill would "encourage energy-intensive industries in the US to move production to those locations where the environmental rules are lax--wiping out thousands more US jobs in the process" and "paving the road to an economic hell for millions of working Americans."

Economic Nationalism or Global Cooperation?

Many speakers paraphrased in one way or another Friedman's statement that green is the "new red, white, and blue." Yet despite considerable rhetorical flag-waving, many of the same speakers also called for global solidarity and cooperation in the face of a planetary crisis. There was a similar tension between the desire that new jobs be located in the United States (or even in one state rather than another) and condemnation of a competitiveness in which smokestack chasing, even green smokestack chasing, leads to a "race to the bottom."

Will Climate Change Policies Cause a Political Backlash?

The nightmare scenario that keeps Jim Barrett, executive director of [Redefining Progress](#), awake at night is that poorly designed measures to cut greenhouse gas emissions might lead to an anti-environmentalist political revolt.

What If Higher Energy Costs Put the Squeeze on the Middle Class?

The result, according to Barrett, could be "scorched political earth followed shortly by a scorched actual earth." Climate policy is likely to fail in a global economy unless it takes into account the needs of working families.

Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Ryback noted that when he speaks to young audiences, they don't see us facing distinct energy, security and environmental issues. Rather, they see shortage of fossil fuels, war for oil and global warming as part of the same dynamic. The Green Jobs conference made clear that global warming should not be seen primarily as an environmental issue but rather as a seismic shift with an impact similar to but even greater than the Industrial Revolution or globalization. The response to global warming will require big changes. Thank goodness some people are trying to figure out how these changes can benefit people as well as the planet.