

HUNDREDS DREAM GREEN AT GOOD JOBS CONFERENCE

By Peter Hogarth and Charlotte Ireland in Rabble.ca

An overwhelming majority of Canadians agree that climate change is a pressing issue that demands immediate action. On Nov. 7, over 600 participants -- trade unionists, social justice activists, environmentalists and youth -- came together for the Good Green Jobs Conference to start building a green future that is economically viable, environmentally sustainable, equitable and just for all

In the lead up to the UN climate change summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, the realities of inaction on climate change are becoming ever more apparent. In the midst of a staggering recession that has seen 43,000 jobs lost in the last month alone, the government insists that the economy and the environment are two separate issues that require separate solutions. Stephen Harper's Conservative government continues to provide massive subsidies for the tar sands, making the possibility of Canada signing onto a binding, scientifically-based treaty at Copenhagen an almost certain impossibility. Moreover, responding to the Pembina Institute's recent [study](#) on how Canada could meet its commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Federal Environment Minister Jim Prentice called the report "irresponsible and the economic costs unacceptable."

The radical measures that are needed to create clean energy and reduce greenhouse gases -- wind power, solar power, tidal power, geothermal etc. -- would create thousands of good jobs for workers who have been laid-off over the past year, especially in the manufacturing sector. In order to address both the economic and climate crisis, we have to demand the creation of good, green jobs.

This is the context in which [Good Jobs For All](#), a community-labour coalition, organized the Good Green Jobs For All Conference. The conference was co-chaired by Nigel Barriffe, co-chair of the Education Action Etobicoke North and who is currently building a movement in Rexdale to retrofit local schools; and Carolyn Egan, president of the Steelworkers Toronto Area Council and member of the Canadian labour delegation to the UN Climate Change Summit.

Keynote speakers included Tonika Morgan, a movement builder and member of the Medina Collective; Peter Tabuns, former executive director of Greenpeace Canada and NDP MPP for Toronto Danforth; and Clayton Thomas-Muller, tar sands campaign organizer for the Indigenous Environmental Network.

The conference featured three workshops designed to identify common issues and mobilization strategies that can help build a green movement focusing on: employment, local procurement policies, skills renewal, a just transition for workers, the importance of a living wage and commitments from all levels of government.

The first workshop focused on developing campaigns and strategies for renewing key areas of infrastructure such as housing, transit, schools, energy and public services. The second workshop discussed challenges for building a movement to create green manufacturing jobs, jobs that will pay a living wage and be vital to creating the green infrastructure and economy necessary to combat climate change. Finally, a youth workshop brought together youth and allies to identify community campaigns to ensure that racialized and working class youth are included in building a green economy through its focus on equitable access to career training and good entry level jobs.

Community and youth groups were strongly represented at the conference, with participants from the Jane/Finch Green Anti-Poverty Coalition, the Community Organizing for Responsible Development, the Lawrence Heights Environmental Justice Group, ACORN (Association for Community Organizations for Reform Now) and the Canadian Federation of Students (Ontario).

The conference was a resounding success. As report-backs from the various workshops were announced to the filled-to-capacity plenary room, the energy was undeniable. Overwhelmingly, the various groups agreed that accessible education and training were a top priority, that marginalized community and youth voices needed to be heard, highlighting the need to mobilize communities and pressure all levels of government for new transit and energy infrastructure, local procurement and hiring policies, and to promote an economic model that does not callously forsake workers' rights and the natural environment.

John Cartwright, president of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, discussed the importance of workers' rights in the movement to build a just and sustainable green economy:

"The test will be how we take the momentum of the conference and translate it into real power-building. People have been talking about the green economy, but unless you force those decision-makers to meet certain standards: equity, social inclusion, decent standards of work and wages, and sustainability, unless you create a framework that includes these, you won't win."

An often repeated theme throughout the event was the need to dispel the myth that labour and the environment are at odds. Rather, the Good Green Jobs For All Conference was a watershed moment in the environmental movement in Canada as it is a very deliberate step away from the notion of environmentalism as a middle-class, white issue of conservation and towards a vision of environmentalism that takes into consideration the need for racial, economic and social justice in the transition to a green economy, so that no one is left behind.

The focus of the conference was really driven home by the closing speech of Clayton Thomas-Muller who emphasized the need for unity in the struggle to protect the earth from rapacious corporations and the governments who act in their service and to engage in an environmental movement that speaks to the realities of workers, low-income communities and indigenous people:

"We face a time where there is an incredible convergence and consolidation of corporate power and it's represented by massive developments such as Canada's tar sands. We need to respond to that with the consolidation of people power. And the way to do that is through grassroots, base-building strategies and tactics. If we are going to confront climate change, a global crisis that is rooted in social inequity, we have to understand that it has become the civil rights movement of our generation. We can no longer have privileged academic, predominantly white people speaking on behalf of diverse communities -- of colour, racialized communities and First Nations communities -- who are the worst impacted, not only by climate change but also by the fossil fuel regime. These communities need to speak for themselves and need to do the policy interventions that make sense for them."

To sum up the day, Winnie Ng, co-chair of the Good Jobs For All Coalition, stated that the conference is the first step in implementing the "new three Rs" for the environmental and labour movement: re-covering voices from the margins, reclaiming public space and resources, and re-making solidarity so that no one is left behind.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER CLAYTON THOMAS-MULLER delivers powerful statement on climate justice – *click here* <http://goodjobsforall.ca/?p=422> . For other videos or audio coverage of the conference, go to www.goodjobsforall.ca