



Who Gains from the Green Economy?

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Last year, the Oakland-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, with a minuscule staff and budget, worked relentlessly to pass the Green Jobs Act in Congress—a bill that if authorized will direct \$125 million to green the nation's workforce and train 35,000 people each year for "green-collar jobs." That summer, Ella Baker Center and the Oakland Alliance also secured \$250,000 from the city to build the Oakland Green Jobs Corp, a training program that promises to explicitly serve what is probably the most underutilized resource of Oakland: young workingclass men and women of color.

In these efforts lay a hopeful vision—that the crises-ridden worlds of economics and environmentalism would converge to address the other huge crisis—racism in the United States. It is what some of its advocates call a potential paradigm shift that, necessitated by the earth's climate crisis, can point the way out of "gray capitalism" and into a green, more equitable economy. The engine of this model is driven by the young and proactive leadership of people of color who intend to build a different solution for communities of color.

Van Jones, president of the Ella Baker Center, talks about how earlier waves of economic flourishes didn't much impact Black communities. "When the dotcom boom went bust, you didn't see no Black man lose his shirt," he points out, only half joking. "Black people were the least invested in it."

Climate change is the 21st century's wake-up call to not just rethink but radically redo our economies. Ninety percent of scientists agree that we are headed toward a climate crisis, and that, indeed, it has already started. With the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions, the clean energy economy is poised to grow enormously. This sector includes anything that meets our energy needs without contributing to carbon emissions or that reduces carbon emissions; it encompasses building retrofitting, horticulture infrastructure (tree pruning and urban gardening), food security, biofuels and other renewable energy sources, and more.

It's becoming clear that investing in clean energy has the potential to create good jobs, many of them located in urban areas as state and city governments are increasingly adopting public policies designed to improve urban environmental quality in areas such as solar energy, waste reduction, materials reuse, public transit infrastructures, green building, energy and water efficiency, and alternative fuels.

According to recent research by Raquel Pinderhughes, a professor of urban studies at San Francisco State University, green jobs have an enormous potential to reverse the decades-long trend of unemployment rates that are higher for people of color than whites. In Berkeley, California, for example, unemployment of people of color is between 1.5 and 3.5 times that of white people, and the per capita income of people of color is once again between 40 to 70 percent of that of white people.

Pinderhughes defines green-collar jobs as manual labor jobs in businesses whose goods and services directly improve environmental quality. These jobs are typically located in large and small for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, and public and private institutions. Most importantly, these jobs offer training, an entry level that usually requires only a high school diploma, and decent wages and benefits, as well as a potential career path in a growing industry.

Yet, though green economics present a great opportunity to lift millions of unemployed, underemployed or displaced workers—many of them people of color—out of poverty, the challenge lies in defining an equitable and workable development model that would actually secure good jobs for marginalized communities.

"Green economics needs to be eventually policy-driven. If not, the greening of towns and cities will definitely set in motion the wheels of gentrification," Pinderhughes adds. "Without a set of policies that explicitly ensures checks and measures to prevent gentrification, green economics cannot be a panacea for the ills of the current economy that actively displaces and marginalizes people of color, while requiring their cheap labor and participation as exploited consumers."

What remains to be seen is how green economics will transition out of current prevalent models of ownership and control. A greener version of capitalism could possibly address some of the repercussions of a consumption economy and the enormous waste it generates. But critics and activists also worry that a "replacement mindset" is largely driving the optimism and energy of greening our industries and jobs. Hybrid cars replace conventional cars, and organic ingredients are promised in a wide variety of products from hand creams to protein bars. Many mainstream environmental festivals like the popular Green Festival held in San Francisco, Washington, D.C. and Chicago, have yet to embrace a democratic diversity. Peddling wonderful green products and services that will reduce your ecological footprint, they are accessible, alas, only to elite classes that are predominantly white.


"An authentic green economics system is one that would mark the end of capitalism," notes B. Jess Clarke, editor of *Race, Poverty and the Environment*. And one that would ensure labor rights and organizing, collective ownership and equality are all at the heart of it, he adds. "The real green movement has not started yet."

A movement toward economic justice requires the mobilizing and organizing of the poorest people for greater economic and political power. A good green economic model would surely be one where poor people's labor has considerable economic leverage. "Wal-Mart putting solar panels on its store roofs is not a solution," says Clarke. "We need real solutions and strong measures—carbon taxes on imports from China would considerably reduce the incentive of cheap imports and make

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a push to produce locally."

"Green economics can create a momentum—a political moment akin to the civil rights movement. But unless workers are organized, any success is likely to be marginal. So the key problem is in organizing a political base," adds Clarke. Green economics, then, is not just a green version of current economic models but a fundamental transformation, outlines Brian Milani, a Canadian academic and environmental expert who has written extensively on green economics. He writes in his book *Designing the Green Economy*: "Green economics is the economics of the real world—the world of work, human needs, the earth's materials, and how they mesh together most harmoniously. It is primarily about 'use value,' not 'exchange value' or money. It is about quality, not quantity, for the sake of it. It is about regeneration—of individuals, communities, and ecosystems—not about accumulation, of either money or material."

The \$125 million promised through the Green Jobs Act is admittedly a drop in the bucket as far as the amount of financing and infrastructure needed to implement green jobs, activists say. Among the Democratic presidential candidates, all of whom have proposals for clean energy investment, talk has run into the billions of dollars for green economic stimulus.

So who will pay to get the green economy going and train a green workforce?

Throughout history we have freely released carbon and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere and not had to pay a penny for the privilege. Industrial polluters and utilities may face fines for toxic emissions or releasing hazardous waste, but there has been no cost for emitting carbon as a part of day-to-day business. However, we have come to find that the atmosphere is a limited resource, and it's getting used up fast.

By limiting the total amount of carbon that can be released, and making industries pay for their pollution, global warming policies finally recognize that the atmosphere has value and must be protected. The policy with the most momentum in the U.S. and around the world is to "cap and trade" the amount of carbon that can be emitted every year. With this policy, the government sets a hard target for CO2 emissions, and then companies have to trade credits to get back the right to emit that carbon, no longer for free.

One often overlooked fact, though, is that under a "cap and trade" policy, a tremendous amount of money could change hands—the Congressional Budget Office estimates that the new value created by such a policy ranges from \$50—\$300 billion each year. So far, public debate has focused on setting targets and caps, but the question of who will benefit from those credits has largely been ignored. In fact, many proposals have simply given these valuable new property rights away to polluters for them to sell to each other, because they were the ones who were polluting to begin with.

Under an important variant of the "cap and trade" policy called "cap and auction," the government not only limits the total carbon emissions, but it also captures the value of those carbon credits for public purposes by requiring that all polluters must bid for and buy back the right to emit. A 100-percent auction of permits would give the public ready access to the ongoing funds we will need to reinvest in social equity and bring down poor people's energy bills, or to support new research, or to launch new projects that not only establish training for green jobs, but create those jobs themselves, rebuilding the infrastructure of our communities for a clean energy economy.

However, there can be a lot of slippage between the green economy and green jobs that actually go to workers of color, especially in today's anti-affirmative action context. In one pilot program, nearly two dozen young people of color were trained to install solar panels, but only one got a job. Ultimately, employers can't be told who to hire, though there are some ideas about providing incentives, like requiring companies to show they hire locally and diversely before public institutions will invest their assets there.

"Green for All," the campaign launched in September 2007 by the Ella Baker Center and other partners like Sustainable South Bronx and the Apollo Alliance, is currently among the leading advocates pushing for policy that would ensure a racially just framework for green economics to grow and flourish, without which, green economics can end up being just a greening consumption. With a goal to bring green-collar jobs to urban areas, this campaign positions itself as an effort to provide a viable policy framework for emerging grassroots, green economic models. The campaign's long-term goal is to secure \$1 billion by 2012 to create "green pathways out of poverty" for 250,000 people by greatly expanding federal government and private sector commitments to green-collar jobs.

"A big chunk of the African-American community is economically stranded," Van Jones said in *The New York Times* last fall as the campaign began. "The blue-collar, stepping-stone, manufacturing jobs are leaving. And they're not being replaced by anything. So you have this whole generation of young Blacks who are basically in economic free fall."

The challenge of making the green economy racially equitable means addressing the question of how to build an infrastructure that includes not just training programs but also the development of actual good jobs and the hiring policies that make them accessible. How can we guarantee that all these new green jobs will go to local residents? As one activist admitted, "There's just no good answer to this so far."

Many of the answers will have to come in the doing, and the details, as green industry continues to take shape. There are plenty of ideas about how to create equitable policies, as outlined in the report "Community Jobs in the Green Economy" by the Apollo Alliance and Urban Habitat. They include requiring employers who receive public subsidies to set aside a number of jobs for local residents and partner with workforce intermediaries to hire them. Some cities are already requiring developers to reserve 50 percent of their construction jobs for local businesses and residents. Cities can also attach wage standards to their deals with private companies that are pegged to a living wage. In Milwaukee, after two freeway ramps were destroyed downtown, a coalition of community activists and unions won a community benefits agreement from the city to require that the new development include mass transit, green building and living wages for those jobs.

As we have learned in many progressive struggles, communities need to be mobilized and actively involved in generating inclusive policies and pushing policymakers to ensure that green economic development will be just and equitable. Bracken Hendricks, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and co-author of *Apollo's Fire: Igniting America's Clean Energy Economy*, says the green economy movement is still in its early stages of building public support. "There is not yet an organized constituency representing the human face of what it means to face climate change. There is an urgent need for a human face, an equity constituency, to enter into the national debate on climate change."

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Omar Freilla, founder of Green Worker Cooperative, an organization that actively promotes worker-owned and ecofriendly manufacturing jobs to the South Bronx, is convinced that democracy begins at the workplace where many of us as workers and employees spend most of our time. "The environmental justice movement has been about people taking control of their own communities," he says. "Those most impacted by a problem are also the ones leading the hunt for a solution."

Environmental racism is rooted in a dirty energy economy, a reckless linear model that terminates with the dumping of toxins and wastes in poor communities of color that have the least access to political power to change this linear path to destruction.

Defining and then refining green economics as a way to steer it toward bigger change is at the root of understanding the socio-political and economic possibilities of this moment.

Van Jones calls for a historic approach, one that considers the world economy in stages of refinement. "Green capitalism is not the final stage of human development, any more than gray capitalism was. There will be other models and other advances—but only if we survive as a species. But we have to recognize that we are at a particular stage of history, where the choices are not capitalism versus socialism, but green/eco-capitalism versus gray/suicide capitalism. The first industrial revolution hurt both people and the planet, very badly. Today, we do have a chance to create a second 'green' industrial revolution, one that will produce much better ecological outcomes. Our task is to ensure that this green revolution succeeds—and to ensure that the new model also generates much better social outcomes. I don't know what will replace eco-capitalism. But I do know that no one will be here to find out, if we don't first replace gray capitalism."

The people most affected by the injustices of the polluting economy are already helping to lead the way, and it's business at its most unusual.

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