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Saving the Working Class with Green-Collar Jobs

By Bryan Walsh

Van Jones does not look like your typical environmentalist. He doesn't wear Birkenstocks. He's African-American in a movement that tends to be overwhelmingly white. His background is in civil-rights activism — specifically prison reform — a cause he champions in Oakland, Calif. But Jones, the head of the non-profit [Green For All](#) and the author of the new book [The Green-Collar Economy](#), could represent the future of environmentalism in America and a way for the movement to survive and even thrive through the coming recession. "The solution for the environment and the economy will be the same thing," says Jones. ([Listen to Jones talk about the green collar economy on this week's Greencast.](#))

Jones, a charismatic 40-year-old Yale Law School grad who has emerged as a major green star over the past year, argues that environmentalism won't just be about the environment anymore. Instead, it will drive fundamental changes in the way we do business and the jobs we create — that's what he means by a green-collar economy. Over the years, manufacturing and other blue-collar jobs have been gradually outsourced from the U.S. That has hit the working class especially hard, in both cities and rural areas, because decent-paying blue-collar employment is what pulls people out of poverty and into the middle class. At the same time, it's the working class that has also borne the brunt of the high energy prices that result from America's dependence on foreign oil. As the recession darkens, that double bind is likely to worsen.

The answer, Jones writes in his book, is the creation of green-collar jobs that provide working-class employment, shield America from rising fossil fuel prices and stem carbon emissions. These are not the high-tech, high-education "George Jetson" jobs, as Jones puts it, that were created by the Internet and biotech booms. Green-collar jobs include manufacturing solar panels, insulating green homes, servicing wind turbines. These are jobs that can be filled by blue-collar workers who need jobs — and they help the environment to boot. "You can put the country back to work with green solutions that are good for the Earth," says Jones.

Jones has a way with a slogan and a talent for cutting to the core of an argument that some environmentalists (Al Gore, for instance) don't always possess. But while Jones has become the face of the new green-collar economy, he's hardly the only environmentalist pushing the idea. The concept is gaining steam because when it comes to climate change, simply protecting the environment is not enough. The only way the environmental movement can grow beyond a relatively small elite is if it meets broad, basic economic needs, not just green ones. "We need to go from talking about green as a lifestyle choice, and make it an economic choice," says Jones. "We need eco-populism, not eco-elitism."

For that to happen, however, we need serious government policy: smart subsidies for alternative energy and green building, retraining for green-collar jobs, more research money for clean tech — and hopefully a tax on carbon. Both Presidential candidates have gestured at this — though Sen. Barack Obama, who has pledged to spend \$150 billion over 10 years on clean tech, is ready to do more.

But that was before this once-in-a-generation economic crisis hit. Now, with hundreds of billions of dollars in government money being shoveled towards the financial sector, with the economy in free-fall, with once-record oil prices dropping, surely the last thing we can afford is more spending to prop up green dreams?

Jones says we can and we should. This isn't the time to abandon the green push — not just because carbon emissions continue to rise faster than ever or because scientists grow more concerned daily about the fate of the planet. Let's even put aside a politically fraught cap-and-trade program for the moment. A green stimulus package — a Green Deal, perhaps — could not only put the unemployed back to work in the middle of a harsh recession, but also lay the building blocks for a new, more sustainable American economy, one prepared to compete in a future where energy, natural resources and maybe carbon will all come at a premium. The old system failed, and we're picking up the pieces. "We can create an economy that's about production, not just consumption," says Jones. "That's the way forward." It may be hard to believe, but a recession could be the first step to a truly green economy — one that will be ready for a very different future.

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