

## Activist says green needs to touch blue collar

Kelly Zito, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Van Jones is someone who makes you feel like an underachiever, no matter if you're a NASA scientist or a captain of industry. After graduating from Yale Law

School in 1993, Jones established Oakland's Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, which aims to cut youth violence and incarceration rates. More recently, the 40-year-old father of two founded a national group that advocates for job training in the emerging clean technology field - dubbed Green for All.

Echoes of his ideas can be heard among lawmakers from Sacramento to Washington, as well as in his dozens of television appearances and newspaper write-ups. Jones has received awards from everyone from George Lucas and Time Magazine to the San Francisco Foundation. And in between he has found time to work with the United Nations, the Center for American Progress, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Al Gore.

This month, Jones released "The Green Collar Economy," in which he argues that the environmental movement in the United States has thus far been concentrated among the "eco-elite." In order to save both the U.S. economy and the planet, the movement must embrace people in middle- and lower-income brackets by offering them solid, well paying jobs in everything from building weatherizing to wind turbine manufacturing. His book recently hit No. 12 on the New York Times' best-seller list for hardcover nonfiction.

Here is an excerpt of an interview with The Chronicle:

**Q:** In your book ... you make the argument that the two most important problems facing the U.S. are radical social inequality and rampant environmental destruction. Can you explain why in your view the solution to this is a caulk gun?

**A:** We do have these two big problems. But really we have one solution - a green economy ... that really honors the earth but is strong enough to lift millions of people out of poverty through creating what we call green collar jobs. It's not just the Ph.D.s but the Ph. Dos ... getting people skilled up so they know how to make solar panels and wind turbines. You're giving people not just a paycheck but a purpose.

**Q:** You also call out the idea of the eco-elite and the concern over eco-apartheid.

**A:** If the green economy just winds up being this niche economy, where people can afford to pay a green premium for that extra environmental oomph on their products, it's going to be too small to actually do

very much. And 80 percent of the people who are left out wind up undoing the environmental good of that 20 percent. The next stage in green economics is to figure out how we make the green economy not just a place for affluent people but a place for ordinary people to earn money and for low income people to save money.

**Q:** In the book, you go into the idea of environmental racism - or what you call "throwaway" communities.

**A:** There's this environmental justice movement that talks not just about our sister and brother species but our sisters and brothers who are disproportionately targeted by toxic waste in places like Bayview-Hunters Point, places like Richmond, where the big refinery is. There's a lot of asthma, a lot of cancer clusters, a lot of negative health impacts. ... It's low income people, people of color. Now we're saying we want equal protection from the worst pollution, but we also want ... equal opportunity, equal access to the best (of the green economy).

**Q:** Given the divided nature of the political landscape, how could a new president or new Congress make the kind of sweeping changes you talk about?

**A:** I do feel there are some dangers right now because people are just confused. You look at ads on television and you can't tell whether it's the Sierra Club or Chevron. Now, the next step is to clarify. When we say a green job, do we want a job at a nuclear power plant where you come out glowing green? Or are we talking about real renewable solutions like solar, wind, geothermal, water conservation? My hope is that there will be a governing majority ... that is bipartisan, built around a new center of gravity that says, we want the U.S. to be the world leader, but not in war and pollution and incarceration rates.

**Q:** You mention specific solutions discussed by both Sens. Obama and Clinton during the primary race, particularly removing tax breaks for oil companies?

**A:** Fundamentally we have to stop paying polluters and making the polluters pay. Right now we subsidize pollution. We give a lot of money to big oil, big coal, folks who are adding to the problems of global warming. At the same time it's free to dump carbon into the air, by the ton... But it's going cost the whole the planet. That's called a market failure. We want the polluters to pay because if you put a price on carbon, you send a market signal that the carbon age is over, the oil and coal age is over. It's now the solar age. We cannot drill and burn our way out of our energy problems. We can invent and invest our way out.

**Q:** With the economy in such terrible shape right now, how can green be a priority?

**A:** We just found \$700 billion to bail out the bankers. Nobody said that was too expensive. We have the biggest, strongest economy in history of the world. Even on the way down we're bigger than anybody else. It's not question of money, it's a question of priorities. We have a Saudi Arabia of wind in the Plains states, a Saudi Arabia of solar in the Sun Belt. If you build a clean energy grid ... now your energy costs have plunged near zero. ... The U.S. economy will be stronger in ways we can't even imagine.

**Van Jones**

**Age:** 40

**Born:** Jackson, Tenn.

**Education:** Yale Law School, 1993

**Residence:** Oakland

**Occupation:** Author and activist

To listen to a podcast of Van Jones go to [www.sfgate.com/green](http://www.sfgate.com/green).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/27/BAML13N900.DTL>

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