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Can Green Jobs Be Good Jobs?

by **JEREMY BRECHER**

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At the first Good Jobs, Green Jobs conference, held in Pittsburgh a year ago, advocates of green energy bemoaned their inability to get a modest renewable-energy tax credit through Congress over the opposition of the Bush administration. The idea of addressing the economic, energy and environmental crises through green jobs seemed a distant vision. So did the idea that a labor-environment coalition around green jobs could reach beyond the fringes of the two movements. But this year, **things were different**. Meeting in Washington, DC, February 4-6, speakers were reporting in from their BlackBerries on Congressional negotiations of the yet-to-be-approved stimulus package estimated by the Center for American Progress to include **\$80 billion for green jobs**.

The Blue-Green Alliance, which sponsored this year's conference, grew out of a coalition formed in 2006 by the Sierra Club and the United Steelworkers Union. A year ago, the Steelworkers stood alone; today the alliance includes the Communications Workers of America (CWA), the Laborers International Union of America (LIUNA), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Teamsters (IBT), all of which have active programs on green jobs.

It's a challenging time for the labor movement. Union leaders appear genuinely thrilled about the election of President Obama; early in the conference Steelworkers' president Leo Gerard proudly quoted Obama's statement, "I see labor as the solution," not the problem. The blind, neoliberal faith in markets and globalization has come crashing down along with the global financial system, vindicating the lonely labor voices who have long been calling for government guidance of the economy. But the Great Recession is decimating labor's thinning ranks, and unions face budget cuts and layoffs not only by employers but also within their organizations. Two major unions, SEIU and UNITE HERE, are engaged in very public internecine battles, while representatives of the Obama administration are trying to nudge the two national labor federations to reunite.

In this context, the chance to grow membership through green jobs represents a rare opportunity, one that the labor movement is taking up with alacrity. "Global warming is a working families issue," said AFL-CIO president John Sweeney at a press conference to announce a \$1 million Green Jobs Center at the National Labor College.

Part of labor's involvement reflects the concern that has grown among many constituencies as melting ice caps, burgeoning wildfires and devastating floods demonstrate the immediate threat of climate change. At Sweeney's press conference, Mark Ayres, head of the union's building trades department, endorsed green jobs as good policy and good for labor. "But there is a more important reason" to fight global warming, he said, showing the audience a photograph his granddaughters.

The labor movement acknowledges its self-interest in supporting climate protection. The stimulus package will provide jobs that may become union jobs, and future initiatives for transportation, carbon regulation and other "green" legislation may create additional jobs. Some unions have extensive training

programs around the country, and Obama's green job initiatives are likely to provide both students and funding. Gerard cited a study showing that a \$100 billion investment would create 2 million good new jobs. "We gave AIG \$125 billion, and what did we get for it?" he asked. "If we had invested in the real economy, we'd have 1 million new jobs and be on the way to reducing our carbon footprint."

Many trade unionists emphasized that green jobs involve the same kinds of work and skills as other jobs already widespread in the economy. As Gerard put it, "A green job is any job that brings us toward the green economy." The wind turbines being manufactured in the Midwest produce green jobs that are the same as traditional manufacturing jobs--steel, rebar, cement and assembly jobs. Energy-efficient windows use the established skills of unemployed flat-glass workers. Retrofitting public buildings and rebuilding the energy grid provide jobs that use the existing skills of construction workers, electricians and others who are often union members. Achim Steiner, head of the United Nations Environment Program, told the conference that there are already more jobs in renewable energy worldwide than in the oil and gas industries.

The issue of green jobs is also giving rise to important alliances for the labor movement. Sierra Club president Allison Chin joined labor leaders at a Capitol Hill rally supporting the **Employee Free Choice Act**, calling it "one of our highest priorities." Labor leaders seemed genuinely moved by the support. Teamsters' president James Hoffa noted that the union's decision to quit the **ANWAR Coalition**, which supported Alaska drilling, and join the Blue-Green Alliance was in part because environmentalists, unlike the oil companies, were proving to be a friend to labor. "It's about finding out who your friends are," he said. Hoffa praised the coalition of labor, environmental and community organizations that forced the Port of Los Angeles to radically improve labor and environmental conditions. Hoffa and Gerard noted that the Green Jobs movement represents a return to the labor-environmental alliance that had fought the World Trade Organization during the 1999 "**Battle of Seattle**."

Big Questions Remain

As the question of climate protection has moved from the "whether" of the Bush era to the "how" of the Obama era, some of the underlying tensions within and between environmental and labor movements are becoming more pressing. Many of these same divisions are front and center in Congress and even within the Obama administration, making the attitude of labor a potentially important weight in the balance:

Are Green Jobs Good Jobs?

"**High Road or Low Road? Job Quality in the New Green Economy**," a new study commissioned by several union and environmental groups, described some good green jobs but recounted others that involved low wages, health and safety hazards, and gross violation of labor rights. It recommended specific measures, including wage requirements for subsidies; wage standards and prevailing wage requirements for contractors; and web-based disclosure of company compliance. Unions pushed to include such measures in Obama's stimulus package. Bob Baugh, the AFL-CIO's energy policy point person, says that unions have turned the **Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act of 2008** into an economic development bill by encouraging the inclusion of similar measures.

Will 'Clean Coal' Split the Coalition?

It is possible to have both more green jobs and more greenhouse gases. Even as the labor movement has touted green jobs, it has advocated expanded use of coal based on "carbon capture and storage" (CCS), or "clean coal" technology. But many scientists doubt that CCS will work at affordable costs within the next twenty years, if ever, leading most environmentalists to oppose expanded use of coal. The lack of consensus on this subject was reflected in the fact that the conference had two separate workshops on coal, one on the need for so-called "clean coal," the other casting doubt on whether such technology is realistic.

Trade and Globalization

Trade unionists at the conference were concerned--indeed, preoccupied--with the question of whether green jobs created by climate protection programs would take hold in America. "As we move to a green economy, we aren't putting our jobs up for bid for China or Russia," Leo Gerard said. "We won't give away our economic future to countries with slave labor and no pollution laws." Resentment was particularly strong against China; as one labor leader put it, "China threatens the planet."

But blaming other countries for what is in good measure a made-in-America economic, energy and environmental crisis could generate a right-wing backlash that would come back to haunt the labor movement.

Unions can resist rather than feed the recession-linked xenophobia by focusing on the critical role of global corporations in exporting US jobs and exploiting workers in China and other poor countries. Gerard pointed out that 58 percent of manufacturing inputs from China are from companies that used to manufacture the same product in the United States. Those US and global corporations should be the focus of scrutiny. As Bama Athreya of the International Labor Rights Forum put it, "People at the top are calling the shots. Wal-Mart and Coke are treating people badly everywhere. We should look at corporations as the target. We need solidarity across borders to hold corporations accountable."

Real Progress

As important as labor's support for green jobs is its move toward greening the workplaces and communities of America. The Teamsters' emerging focus is on building alliances with environmental and community groups up and down the transportation supply chain. The Laborers' Union is expanding training for green construction jobs and is working with inner-city advocates like Van Jones's Green for All. The Boilermakers Union is working to identify domestic manufacturing niches where skilled metalworkers can use their skills creating the hardware for the green economy. With these small but significant steps, labor unions can provide the environmental movement with needed muscle that can make a real difference for American workers and for the planet.

About Jeremy Brecher

Jeremy Brecher is a historian whose books include *Strike!*, *Globalization from Below*, and, co-edited with Brendan Smith and Jill Cutler, *In the Name of Democracy: American War Crimes in Iraq and Beyond* (Metropolitan/Holt). He has received five regional Emmy Awards for his documentary film work. He is a co-founder of WarCrimesWatch.org. [more...](#)

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