



Good Jobs, Green Jobs Conference Girds Activists for Struggle Ahead

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More than 3,5000 people came to Washington, DC on May 4th through 6th to participate in the third “Good Jobs, Green Jobs” conference. Sponsored by the Blue-Green Alliance, a group formed in 2006 by the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club, the conference took on a very different tone that last year’s event. Last year’s conference, held just weeks after the inauguration of President Obama, focused on the promise of a “green new deal.” But if the 2009 conference had focused on the “green” part of the conference name, the 2010 conference was decidedly focused on the “jobs” part. Richard Trumka, President of the AFL-CIO, recited some of the grim job statistics at one conference plenary session, “Since the start of the recession in 2007, we are 11 million jobs in the hole. There are 17 million Americans who are unemployed and 25 million are either unemployed or under-employed. And those who are still working are up against wage freezes and hollowed-out health care and shattered retirement plans.”

The previous day, a session titled “Can Green Jobs Solve the Biggest Employment Crisis since the Great Depression?” explored how to turn around the job numbers. Carole James, leader of the opposition New Democratic Party in British Columbia, Canada (which presently holds 35 out of the 84 seats in the provincial assembly), called for government to focus resources in three areas: education, research & development in green infrastructure and technology, and investment in renewable energy. Rob Atkinson, President of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, also called for government spending on energy technology development, as well as supporting a trade policy to counter “foreign clean energy mercantilism.” Robert Kuttner, author of *A Presidency in Peril* and Co-Editor of *The American Prospect*, called for the development of an industrial policy that would help build green jobs in the United States. Juliet Schor, Professor at Boston College and author of an upcoming book, *Plentitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*, called for work sharing through shorter work hours and urged policies that supported a re-localization of the economy through green businesses generated by small-scale producers.

Solutions were offered, but the tone was clearly one of concern. Kuttner, for example, pointed out, “We are not going to have a green economy without having an economy.” Speaking specifically about green jobs, Kuttner added, “Right now, we are not getting the supply chains and we are not getting the good, green jobs ... we don’t even have the beginning of a policy that green jobs have to be as good.” Kuttner called for the federal government to use its purchasing power to require firms that get federal contracts be “high road” employers. Citing the British historian G. M. Trevelyan, Kuttner worried, that like those failed revolutions of 1848, the United States presently might be at “a turning point of history in which history failed to turn.” Carole James, responding to an audience question about vision for the future, responded somewhat more optimistically, that, “There isn’t one answer. It isn’t a single fix. This is a time of transition. And it will be uncomfortable. And there will be uncertainty.” Clear from all of the panel participants was the idea that the transition to a green economy will not be an easy matter.

Nonetheless, while the overall economic picture remains one of high unemployment, the conference did highlight a broad range of innovation in the development of green jobs. Fred Potter, Vice President at Large of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters told the story of the Los Angeles “Clean Trucks” program, which, since October 2008, has replaced 10,000 old trucks with 6,600 EPA-compliant vehicles, including 600 natural gas vehicles. Getting to this point required a union and community organizing effort that succeeded in changing the status of truck drivers from independent contractors who must maintain their own trucks to employees and making the companies responsible for providing clean trucks. Porfirio Diaz, a truck driver in Oakland, California, where a similar organizing campaign is under way, made a similar point, “The solution for us is to become employees and for industry to take responsibility for clean trucks and employees and for us to organize a union,” Diaz said.

At a breakout session, Chandra Brown, Vice President of Oregon Iron Works, told the story of the subsidiary she heads, United Streetcars, which is the first company to manufacture streetcars in the United States for decades. “We are creating jobs. I am hiring. That is a fantastic story. We are re-creating a new industry. We are in-sourcing jobs. We are taking jobs away from Europe and bringing them back to the United States. We are competing with them and we are winning. I can’t say it is easy, but it can be done,” Brown said. Supported by a government investment of \$2.4 million and more than \$1 million of internal investment, United Streetcars developed a supplier network of 200 vendors and completed its first streetcar. It now has \$50 million in orders for 13 streetcars in Portland, which generates 150 jobs. The company is also now seeking orders from Washington, DC and Seattle.

At a plenary session, Governor Ed Rendell (D) of Pennsylvania touted his state’s clean energy programs. A state investment of \$1 billion, Rendell said, had generated \$5 billion in private investment and 8,300 jobs. Pennsylvania, Rendell added, is now the third leading state in green energy jobs, after the much larger states of California and Texas. At the same time, Rendell also sounded a more cautionary note, “Two things are in peril: America’s energy supply source for the future and American manufacturing. We are in real danger of becoming a society that doesn’t produce things,” Rendell said. “The beauty of green energy,” Rendell added is that, “it can protect our environment, it can preserve manufacturing, and provide goods jobs. So we have to get serious.

Senator John Kerry (D) of Massachusetts expressed optimism that while the United States “cannot drill and burn our way out of this crisis. We can invest and invent our way out of this.” Kerry described the Senate energy bill he is coauthoring (the Kerry-Lieberman American Power Act), which aims to reduce carbon emissions by 17 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050. Kerry argued that setting a price for carbon, as the bill would do, is consistent with “the principle that the polluter pays.” Most of the money collected would be rebated to individuals. “Two thirds of every dollar raised goes back to the American consumer on your energy bill. After a couple of start up years, 100% goes to the rebate. For the first couple of years, one third goes to fund energy efficiency and cushion energy-dependent, trade impacted industries,” Kerry explained.

Leveraging federal spending to “buy American” to spur domestic manufacturing was a consistent theme throughout the speeches. Kerry, for instance, framed his energy bill as a way to “rebuild

America.” Senator Jeff Markley (D-OR) hammered at this point, “The motto of our green jobs strategy has to be ‘made in America’” said Markley. “Let us seize this moment to rebuild in America.

Secretary of Energy Dr. Steven Chu also addressed the conference. Chu touted the accomplishments of \$80 billion in stimulus bill spending on energy. For example, Chu estimated that between 2 and 2.4 million jobs saved or created through stimulus spending. In wind power alone, Chu said that stimulus spending spurred the development of “2,400 MW of wind-power capacity that otherwise would not have come on line in 2009, creating 50,000 jobs.”

At the same time, Chu sounded a similar theme to Markley and Kerry about the need for the United States to catch up with other countries. “China and the European Union see an economic opportunity to lead in the new industrial revolution and they are moving aggressively,” Chu said. “They know if they succeed they can export as well. The U.S. still has the best R&D and innovation capacity in the world. If the U.S. policy is set right, that community will respond. But time is running out and the train is leaving the station.”

The two leading organizations in the Blue Green Alliance are the Sierra Club and the Steelworkers, so it was no surprise that it was left to Carl Pope, Executive Chairman of the Sierra Club, and Leo Gerard, President of the United Steelworkers, to offer closing remarks at the conference. Pope labeled the transition to a green economy as the “the work of our generation” and identify three major issues. First, Pope noted, is the challenge of scale. “We have a big coal industry and a big oil industry and they will use every ounce of their power to slow us down. The first step will be the hardest; the political barriers will go away as we shrink the disproportionate power of coal and oil in the American economy,” Pope said. Second, it is the challenge of speed. “If we really want a green job revolution, we have to build a green economy fast, almost recklessly,” Pope argued. The third challenge, Pope argued is that energy markets are “rigged” making it hard for new entrants to break in. According to Pope, even when wind energy is actually cheaper, utilities don’t want to use it because they buy it from someone else and they make money by having expensive power plants.” Despite the challenges, Pope expressed optimism that green job activists would prevail because they are on the “right side of history.”

Leo Gerard, too, underscored the scope of the challenge ahead. “The job generators, since World War II, have been the auto industry, aerospace, commercial building construction, and home building construction,” said Gerard. “That’s over. The reality – when it comes back, it needs to come back green.”

Gerard also underscored the high stakes in the current green policy debates: “If we let this opportunity – which is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – slip ... what will be there for our kids? To me, the Blue Green Alliance, with its 8.2 million members, has got to be the front line on offense that is going to make sure that we fight for the kind of legislative victories we need for our kids and our grandkids.”

For more information on the Blue Green Alliance, see: www.bluegreenalliance.org.