



Good Jobs, Green Jobs Conference Calls for Shift in Movement Strategy to the States

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More than 2,500 people came to participate in the fourth annual “Good Jobs, Green Jobs” conference, held in Washington DC on February 8th and 9th. Sponsored by the BlueGreen Alliance, a group formed in 2006 by the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club and stung by Democratic Party losses in the 2010 midterm elections, this year’s event focused less on immediate goals and more on building a “good jobs, green jobs” movement for the long haul. The opening plenary involved a range of speakers including BlueGreen Alliance Executive Director David Foster, United Steelworkers President Leo W. Gerard, Kevin Knobloch of the Union of Concerned Scientists, EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson, and National Economic Council Director Gene Sperling.

Gerard set the tone for the morning’s session, calling for a renewed commitment to grassroots organizing in pursuit of what he termed “restorative development.” Gerard added that, “We’re going to need a grassroots movement if we’re going to be successful.” In terms of policy, Gerard called for industrial planning focused on facilitating a transition to a more sustainable economy. “If we can come together again with an industrial plan that gives us some direction for the future,” Gerard said, “workers and unions will give you the most skilled workforce in the world” to meet the demands of the new economy. echoed Gerard’s comments, “There is no reason in the world we cannot lead in energy ... the key is policy. It is not accidental that Germany is leading photovoltaics and Spain in wind-power. We need to move toward low carbon standards – set the standards and let the technologies compete.” In her remarks, EPA Administrator Jackson emphasized four Obama administration priority areas regarding green jobs: 1) Operating pollution control technology; 2) Generating jobs matching a broad range of skill sets from scientists to construction workers, 3) Locating job opportunities in communities suffering from high unemployment, and 4) Creating jobs on American soil.

The second plenary session focused explicitly on a theme emphasized by Gerard in the morning session: the task of building a stronger grassroots movement. Bill Press, who moderated the first day’s afternoon panel, noted the long history of conflict between environmentalists and unions that had inhibited alliance building in the past. Speaking from the environmentalist perspective, Press noted that, “We wanted to save the coastline and the building trades wanted to build condos. We wanted to end nuclear plants and the ironworkers wanted to build them. We wanted to save the redwoods and loggers wanted to cut them.” The result, Press noted, was that corporate interests could exploit these divisions for their own benefit. “We decided that we needed to get smarter and think of ways to get together,” Press added.

Responding to a question by Press as to whether “green jobs” is more hype than reality, Natural Resources Defense Council President Frances Beinecke noted that, “There are real jobs. In the

Empire State Building they are replacing every window. The workers in Michigan who are producing hybrid cars, those are green jobs. The steelworkers who are putting 250 tons of steel into a wind turbine, those are green jobs.” Beinecke added, however, that movement building at the grass roots is sorely needed. “We have to go back to the states. In California, we defeated Proposition 23 [anti-environmental initiative on the fall 2010 ballot]. Six million people voted against it. It was the largest single vote on climate change and it was an overwhelming victory. We have to bring the Congress along by going into the states and building a movement. Solving climate change is a green energy movement – it’s practical. We’re going to have to do it very specifically state by state. We have to build it from the ground up,” Beinecke said.

Two union presidents: Mary Kay Henry, President of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Larry Cohen, President of Communications Workers of America (CWA) echoed Beinecke’s remarks. “We have to build a movement that achieves Prop 23 times 49,” said Henry. “We are completely capable of turning this around by 2013. That we can do as a movement building it from the states up.” Cohen offered a similar analysis: “Our job is to create the grass roots and in the streets actions around the country to show that the only party is not the tea party. That there is a working class party that will fight back. I think we can build that movement. We’re ready to fight back.”

Arlene Holt Baker, Executive Vice President of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations” kicked off the following day’s closing plenary session on an optimistic note. Baker pointed out that the United States in 2010 experienced its “first gain in manufacturing jobs in more than a decade” — 160,000 jobs. Those “good jobs,” she asserted, “are the results of the healthy recovery of our auto industry. There are five new battery plants of electric vehicles in Michigan. Those were made possible by federal investments.” Baker also pointed to other examples of green jobs creation including in the state of Oregon, where United Streetcar Company has become the first American company in decades to assemble streetcars. Baker also heralded the “30/10 Initiative” in Los Angeles, which aims to use bond financing to build 30 years of mass transit in the next 10 years.

Jared Bernstein, Chief Economist and Economic Policy Advisor for Vice President Joe Biden, sought to put the “green jobs” strategy in a broader macroeconomic context. “Let’s start by agreeing that neither are we 5-year planners nor believers in laissez faire,” Bernstein said. In particular, Bernstein noted that the public sector finances more than 80 percent of basic research, because basic research, even though it has high long-term returns, by definition lacks short-term commercial returns. As a result, Bernstein argued, government must play an “ongoing supply side role to provide the necessary infrastructure to ensure the most productive outcomes.” Bernstein added that, “This is an agenda that resonates strongly with the BlueGreen Alliance.”

Rounding out the last plenary session, Washington DC broadcaster Kojo Nnandi moderated a panel discussion on the topic of sustainable communities and how to get there. Part of the discussion focused on improvements on the on-the-groundClark Manus, President of the American Institute of Architects highlighted how his profession now strongly advocates for green building and transit-oriented development. Kathy Gerwid, Vice President and Workplace Safety and Environmental Stewardship Officer of Kaiser Permanente noted that the way her employer is structured is one of the reasons why Kaiser has been an industry leader in

sustainability. “Our health plan and hospitals are not-for-profit. We are not driven by shareholder interests: Our motivation is our social mission.” Kaiser’s commitment to the environment goes beyond providing safer working conditions for their employees. To date, Gerwid noted, Kaiser has invested in 15 MW of solar generation capacity nationwide and is in the process of developing 4 MW of fuel cell generation capacity to reduce its carbon footprint.

Despite such gains, however, the focus of the closing plenary was on the political stalemate affecting the movement of green jobs and how to deal with that. Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN) readily acknowledged the reality of that stalemate. Ellison suggested staging a “listening tour” to build support. What if we had a multi-city tour for jobs and economic justice and culminated with a jobs and economic justice march in Washington and forced Washington to focus on putting Americans back to work in high-wage, green jobs?” Ellison asked.

Lawrence J. Hanley, International President of the Amalgamated Transit Union, pointed out that, to date, in the absence of such a movement, the policy response has been mixed. In particular, well before the midterm elections, federal stimulus spending on green jobs was being undercut by cutbacks in operating support for existing mass transit at the state and local levels. “In New York,” Hanley noted, “we are investing in infrastructure that will extend rail in 5-10 years. While we are doing it, we are eliminating bus service that has run for 100 years ... We spent more on transit, but we had record layoffs – more in the operating end since World War II. There is something sick about this when our children are dying to get oil from the ground.”

Hanley, quoting Atlanta transit direct Ben Scott, argued that there needed to be an effort to create a “transit-industrial complex” — patterned, of course, after the military contractor “military industrial complex” — that can organize successfully for sustained federal government support of transit. Hanley said his union aims to organize “the 15 million who board buses and trains everyday to get them to become their own lobby to challenge the war lobby and the highway lobby.” Hanley added that, “In December we held a conference in Chicago with faith based groups and nonprofits interested in transit. We debriefed local presidents at the end – they said we had no idea people were doing this work.” Hanley said his union is working with SEIU to hold similar events in dozens of others cities. We need to “do something that used to be done in this country called organizing,” Hanley emphasized.

David Foster, Executive Director of the BlueGreen Alliance, offered closing. “There are two visions of America. One is a vision to fire public employees. Ours is a vision to hire Americans by the millions to do the work that America needs done. One is a vision that calls innovation a credit default swap. Ours is a vision where we break the addiction of Wall Street. One vision is an America where we go back to burning oil. Ours is a vision that calls innovation the clean energy technologies of the 21st century.”

The situation, Foster added, called for a shift in the work of the BlueGreen Alliance. Instead of holding another national conference next year, Foster said, the Alliance “made a decision to do regional conferences.” The goals, Foster added, are to “meet each other on common ground, create jobs and give hope for 2012.”

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