

Green jobs: Why labor must be at the table

By **BARBARA BYRD**

With the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency, global warming has gone from being a suspect theory to an accepted explanation for severe weather events, flooding and drought. Practically overnight, the call for “green jobs” to help clean up the environment has become a mantra for policy makers around the country – not least because of the hope that public investment in job creation can stimulate our damaged economy.

Shortly before his election, Barack Obama promised to “... invest \$15 billion a year over the next decade in renewable energy, creating five million new green jobs that pay well, can’t be outsourced and help end our dependence on foreign oil.” Governors Kulonowski of Oregon, Gregoire of Washington, and Schwarzenegger of California have all emphasized the potential of taking action on climate change actions to create green jobs.

But we in organized labor know all too well that investing public dollars into a free market system does not automatically guarantee the creation of good jobs. Our participation in these policy discussions, our ability to insert strong labor safeguards into public investment proposals, and our careful monitoring of the results can assure that the economic development raises economic and job standards.

Before exploring this issue, let’s consider the question of what, exactly, is a “green job.” “Green Jobs for America’s Cities,” a 2008 publication of the Apollo Alliance, a coalition of labor, business, environmentalists and community organizations, says that green collar jobs “... are well-paid, career track jobs that contribute directly to preserving or enhancing environmental quality. Like traditional blue-collar jobs, green-collar jobs range from low-skill, entry-level positions to high-skill, higher-paid jobs, and include opportunities for advancement in both skills and wages.”

The report adds an important qualification.

“... if a job improves the environment, but doesn’t provide a family-supporting wage or a career ladder to move low-income workers into higher-skilled occupations, it is not a green-collar job. Such would be the case with workers installing solar panels without job security or proper training, or young people pushing brooms at a green building site without opportunity for training or advancement.”

For the labor movement, this is a crucial distinction. A green job is not an economically sustainable job, and thus not fully “green,” unless it pays a family wage, provides basic health benefits, has a clear career track, and includes worker protections (like the right to organize and, ultimately, a union contract). Since the large-scale creation of green jobs will require large-scale public and private investment, organized labor

needs to make certain that investment is targeted to good job creation, and not squandered on projects that may “green” the environment but lower living standards for working families.



Few green jobs are really new jobs. More often, they are traditional jobs that have been transformed or enhanced with new skills and knowledge: electricians working with solar photovoltaic energy; ironworkers erecting wind turbines; factory workers making energy-efficient appliances or equipment; or skilled construction workers putting up new “green” buildings and retrofitting existing buildings to reduce their carbon emissions and upgrade their heating and cooling systems. Green jobs in the forestry sector might focus on watershed restoration or biomass energy generation. And green jobs aren’t just private sector blue-collar jobs, either. They also exist in government offices where environmental regulations are monitored and enforced and in community organizations that serve as advocates and watchdogs.

A recent report concludes that Washington and Oregon, because of their early action and continuing commitment to clean energy and energy efficiency, could create 41,000 to 63,000 new jobs across five energy sectors by 2025. Organized labor’s challenge is to assure that these new green jobs are good jobs. How can we do that?

First, we need to protect our existing union jobs in manufacturing, construction and forestry, and be proactive in making those jobs and industries more environmentally sound. We can build on our existing employer partnerships, working in cooperation with employers who are willing to invest in new technologies to control their greenhouse gas emissions. In return, we can demand from those employers access to occupational upgrade opportunities and a bigger piece of the economic pie.

Second, we need to pay even more attention to training. Some union apprenticeship programs, for example, already provide high quality training for workers that leads to higher wages and

increased job security. Our apprenticeship training committees and instructors are looking for ways to train apprentices (and retrain journeymen) to work with new green technologies. The

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, for example, has created an entirely new curriculum around solar PVC theory and applications, and is working with its signatory employers to secure solar, wind and geothermal projects. In manufacturing, where in-plant training has been on the decline, we

should take advantage of this window of opportunity to call attention to the superiority of registered apprenticeship and the long-term financial benefits not only to workers but also to employers who invest in these programs.

Third, unions must work with community allies, especially in rural communities that have been hard-hit by job loss, to attract and retain good green employers. Millions of dollars worth of public investment will be made in renewable energy, energy efficiency and related activities. Without explicit standards for good jobs (e.g., provision of family wages, health benefits, and full-time work) and community stability (“claw-back” provisions requiring the return of funds when an employer shuts down or lays off workers), the new green economy will undermine our quality of life rather than improving it. This is not a new approach. Demands for investment in high-wage, high-skill occupations have been made by labor

for decades. The difference now is that organized labor has a unique opportunity to build the power to move this agenda. If we work in coalition with community organizations, and especially the environmental community, on our mutual goals of cleaning up the environment while creating sustainable employment for working families, we can prevail.

And speaking of community allies, let’s not forget that a proliferation of good green jobs can also be an opportunity for the working poor in both towns and rural areas. We ought to be talking with low-income community advocates about how we can work together to craft pathways out of poverty and into good union jobs. Such joint work can not only help rebuild our middle class, but it can also remind non-union workers of the benefits of unions, and strengthen our image as advocates for the public good.

In addition to these three areas of focus, we must continue to fight against free trade agreements without strong labor standards – green jobs are not, after all, immune from outsourcing. And of course we must organize the new clean tech industry. Passing the Employee Free Choice Act will be the first step in that longer-term goal.

In short, labor cannot afford to sit back and let elected officials, business leaders and environmentalists develop policy options that will eventually lead to green job creation. We must be at the table, advocating for our members and for working families as a whole, helping to shape an approach that leads to a healthy planet, a sustainable economy, and good family wage (union!) jobs for workers.

(Editor’s Note: Barbara Byrd is secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO and a professor at the Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon. This article first appeared in the Union Register, a publication of the Carpenters Industrial Council.)

Caterer says ‘thanks for support’

To The Editor:

I wish to say “Thank You!” to the Northwest Labor Press and all of you who read the Labor Press for your support of my growing business “Almost Heaven Catering.”

It was a bit scary leaving my Bakers’ Union in-store bakery job last year, to devote my energies to my catering company. I did not want to leave the union, and Terry Lansing talked to me about making my business union and promoting union-made goods. It was a great idea. I am a continuing member of the Bakers Local 114, and it is my dream to grow into a thriving catering company that offers what no other catering company can do: Be union and promote union-made products.

**Misty Wright
Bakers Local 114
Portland**

The Northwest Labor Press helped tremendously in getting myself started with their great article in the Labor Press last year. Since then I have catered numerous functions for unions, union businesses, and the City of Portland. I use union-made ingredients in my meals and at each event display a placard of the union-made items in the meal.

So “thank you” again. Please consider my services when you have an event. You will be served a superior meal of superior made Union ingredients.

OPEN FORUM

Union members come through in holiday toy drive

To The Editor:

This comes with deepest thanks and appreciation for labor’s generous support of the 2008 “Presents from Partners” toy drive.

On Dec. 20, Labor’s Community Service Agency held its annual holiday toy distribution party at Genesis Community Fellowship in Northeast Portland. Donations from 38 local labor organizations and labor leaders resulted in 801 toys provided for 277 underprivileged children from 104 families. Each of the children in attendance received two new toys, a visit with Santa, a stuffed animal, and a candy cane. The labor community’s generosity — abundant even in this difficult economy — made the event a resounding success, bringing smiles of delight and lifting the spirits of the children and their appreciative parents.

On behalf of all the children and their families, a heartfelt thanks for your support.

**Glenn Shuck,
Executive Director, LCSA
Portland**

Union member suggests ways state can save money

To The Editor:

I have three suggestions for Gov. Ted Kulonowski and the Oregon Legislature.

1. The state is short of money. One way to put a dent in the shortfall would be to stop paying national guardsmen and women who work for the state double pay when they go on their two weeks of annual training. They now get their full state pay, plus military pay. They should get the greater of the two.

2. All politicians talk about more money for schools. Clackamas Community College sends out its class schedule four times a year at a cost of over \$1 million — and this is just the mailing cost. The money could be better spent on teachers and more classes.

3. Safety. Many states have laws stating that when you use your windshield wipers you must also turn on your lights. Also, when your registration tags are renewed, a safety inspection is required. Why not in Oregon? This would cut down on accidents and police would not have as many accidents to investigate.

**Glen Savage
IAM Lodge 63 (Retired)
Milwaukie**