

If Labor and Greens join forces



Photos by Alex Garland, courtesy of the BlueGreen Alliance Foundation.

IBEW Local 76 apprentices in Washington are learning how to install solar panels — like this one on display Sept. 15 at the BlueGreen Alliance's Clean and Fair Economy Summit in Olympia, Washington. At the summit, IBEW Local 48 was one of several organizations singled out for praise — for its commitment to electric cars and solar power.

By Don McIntosh

From the vantage point of the year 2017, it's not hard to imagine two near-distant futures: one in which humankind rallies to stabilize global climate by using renewable energy to meet human needs, or one where humanity fails to do that, and ends up in a world of superstorms and rising seas, of wars and mass migrations as crop failures create millions of desperate refugees. Either way, the history that will be written in the near-distant future will be about decisions that are being made now.

What role if any will organized labor play in those decisions? One possibility: Labor could ally with environmentalists to speed up the needed transition to a post-fossil-fuel economy — and make sure that it's a "just transition" that improves economic opportunity for working people. To discuss that prospect, 180 environmental, labor, and political leaders from around the United States met in Olympia, Washington, Sept. 14 and 15 for a "Clean and Fair Economy Summit" organized by the BlueGreen Alliance, a group that unites labor and environmental groups around common issues.

"This is a time for labor in particular to be bolder, rather than to hunker down," declared Washington State Labor Council President Jeff Johnson.

Other countries are getting busy, converting from fossil fuels to renewable energy, making good on commitments they made at the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement.

"Unless we fight to win now together, we'll be defeated separately."

— Kim Glas,
BlueGreen Alliance executive director



"This is a time for labor in particular to be bolder, rather than to hunker down."

— Jeff Johnson,
Washington State Labor Council president

But similar commitments made by President Obama are now stalled under President Trump. Unless Trump has a profound change of heart, action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will be possible only at the state and local level for the next three-and-a-half years.

It appears the West Coast is moving ahead.

In Oregon, one third of state legislators (all Democrats) have signed on in support of a proposal to set up a "cap-and-invest" program which would generate \$690 million a year by auctioning off a gradually declining number of greenhouse gas emission permits — and use that money to fund a transition to alternative energy and efficiency. Advocates are looking to the Democrat-led Oregon Legislature to pass it when it meets again in February 2018.

Meanwhile, in the state of Washington, an unprecedented coalition of labor, environmen-

tal and community groups has come together around a carbon tax initiative that could be on the ballot in November 2018. The initiative would raise \$1 billion a year for new investments in renewable energy, mass transit and conservation. The alliance comes after Washington labor opposed a 2016 carbon tax ballot measure because it would have used the revenue to cut business taxes instead of investing it in new clean energy infrastructure. It went down 59-41.

"Unless we fight to win now together, we'll be defeated separately," said Kim Glas, executive BlueGreen Alliance.

Authors of the pending Oregon and Washington proposals are working carefully to exempt energy-intensive, trade-exposed industries (EITEs) — because it doesn't help climate or the local economy if added costs shift production to countries that have even more carbon-intensive production.

MESSAGE FROM A FRIEND



U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley gave a keynote address to labor and environmental leaders Sept. 15 at the BlueGreen Alliance Clean and Fair Economy Summit. Below is an excerpt.

The last four decades have not been good for working people — or the environment. We have jobs getting shipped overseas. Wealth has gone up enormously in the last

four decades. It's just that workers have not gotten to share in the wealth.

And climate change is upon us. In Oregon the change in climate is very good for pine beetles and very bad for trees. Snowpack in the Cascades has been dropping, and that has affected fishing. We've had three worst-ever droughts in the last 15 years in the Klamath Basin, and it's really hurting our farmers and ranchers. On the Oregon coast, we lost a billion oysters because the acidity of the Pacific Ocean increased. And we see it nationally and internationally. In 20 years they anticipate there will be zero glaciers in Glacier National Park. Zika is expanding. Canadian permafrost is melting. Coral reefs are dying. Arctic ice is disappearing. And our forests in Oregon, Washington, and California are on fire. Behind all of this is carbon dioxide from burning fuels.

We are running a race, and we are losing that race.

That means we have to think far more boldly. We must stop burning fossil fuels. We have to do it in the next three decades to have a chance to take this on. And we have to do it in partnership with the world. We have to completely transform our energy economy, and that's a very scary thing, because we have a lot of jobs invested in our current energy economy.

There is going to be a change either way. It's going to be massive. And we have a choice: We can seize it and try to make it the best possible opportunity for American workers.

We have huge manufacturing potential for making the components that go into renewable energy infrastructure. We have huge opportunity for constructing utility-scale and distributed scale solar and wind. We have high-voltage electric lines that need to be constructed, and local grids reinforced. We have residential reconstruction to do, everything from changing water heaters and gas and oil furnaces into heat pumps to installing energy-saving windows and doors.

So we have all these areas in which jobs can be created. We are seeing the renewable energy economy grow 12 times faster than the rest of the economy.

Now, our coal workers and other fossil fuel workers have been powering our economy for many years. They have been the foundation for the standard of living we have today. We have to make sure as we seek to create jobs in a new energy economy that fossil fuel workers are at the front of the line.

Let's seize this opportunity. We can be at the forefront of making these products. We can make sure our fossil fuel workers get the first shot at jobs in the transition. We can make sure our disadvantaged communities have a chance to have that clean energy technology and jobs in their communities, because they're often the most polluted. We can work to make sure the workers have the right to organize in this new economy and get a fair share of the wages they create.

Bobby Kennedy said if we fail to dare, if we do not try, the next generation will harvest the fruit of our difference — a world we did not want, a world we did not choose, and a world we could have made better. Let's apply ourselves now, not only taking on climate disruption, but taking on a much better economy where workers share in the wealth that they create here in the United States of America.

See Merkley's full speech transcript, or watch the speech on video, at <http://bit.ly/2fL87k>