

By Bernard Marszalek

GREEN-COLLAR JOBS, INDUSTRIAL POLICY, AND A SOCIETY WITH A FUTURE

Green-collar jobs have gone mainstream. The popular reception of this program is a remarkable achievement for what began only a few years ago as an underreported campaign uniting a few progressive labor leaders and some politically astute environmentalists.¹

Despite its popular appeal, or maybe due to it, green-collar jobs lack clear definition. The term arose from a groundbreaking alliance between labor and environmentalists to create a massive national effort to jumpstart an alternative energy program. They modeled it after John Kennedy's well-funded Apollo Project to get an American on the moon, fast.

The Apollo Alliance, as the labor/environ-

mentalist collaboration came to be called, works "to catalyze a clean energy revolution" in order "to reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil, cut the carbon emissions that are destabilizing our climate, and expand opportunities for American businesses and workers."²

The labor unions affiliated with the Alliance support it to rally political backing for a program that would replace lost manufactur-

ing jobs with new, good-paying jobs in clean technologies. These new, skilled jobs include erecting wind turbines, installing solar panels, retrofitting old buildings with new “green” technology, and similar pro-environment tasks. Social justice advocates recognized, with the call to create new jobs, an opportunity to establish a national program to train those who have been excluded from economic opportunities, particularly disadvantaged youth. Good-paying jobs in these new green sectors, like the old blue-collar industrial ones that led to a middle-class life-style, got branded as “green-collar jobs.”

With all three movements—labor, environment, and social justice—united behind the “green-collar jobs for all” program, and with Democrats in an election year eager to adopt innovative policies, a political synergy developed. The call for green-collar jobs gained legitimacy and media currency.

The push to promote this program without generating factionalism amongst the ranks meant that no precision was sought in defining which jobs fit the green-collar designation. The purpose of this program was to win popular acceptance, not to create divisive tensions. But without a clear definition, opportunistic corporations will undoubtedly promote their version of “green jobs” in “clean” coal, nuclear energy, and other dubious areas.

Besides the matter of definition, other concerns are holding green jobs back from becoming a prime catalyst for employment stimulation.

Every community seeks development, especially the clean, high tech sort. In the 1990s, for instance, cities and regions across the country sought to create their local versions of Sili-

con Valley. More recently, in farsighted communities, alternative energy production emerged in anticipation of the demise of cheap oil, as the new economic development panacea. A few localities have already secured contracts with European manufacturers of turbines, electric cars, or solar collectors. As significant as this is, it seems unreasonable to expect each city or region, not to mention each state, to become a green technology center.

Of course there are certain sectors of the economy that everyone recognizes as specifically local green job generators, such as retrofitting older buildings and recycling/re-use, and they can provide major employment opportunities for maybe a decade before they peak and then decline. After older structures are fitted with solar collectors and insulated, what will then generate new jobs? And as more products are engineered to be re-used, as they are in Europe, even this sector could eventually shrink.

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Further, green-collar advocates do not resist the centralization of green technologies. Giant energy firms plan for huge, multi-megawatt solar collectors in deserts, which can be

(in some regards) more efficient than the more decentralized schemes.³

These kinds of economic realities should temper the spectacular optimism that assumes millions of green-collar jobs are waiting in the wings to make their appearance.

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Zooming out to take a wider perspective, the demand for green-collar jobs, however, may be a useful way to leverage a long overdue discussion of national industrial policy.

What is “industrial policy?” We can say that whenever a government adopts policy that supports some economic activities over others it is conducting industrial policy. Most obviously, subsidies to agribusiness and oil corporations are foundational elements of the current industrial policy. But even a national health insurance plan that supports premiums to private insurance firms is a form of industrial policy.

The last time this country had a popular and beneficial industrial policy was in the 1930s. The Roosevelt administration cobbled together its New Deal programs to mollify the discontent and mass unrest of unemployed workers. This was the first time the federal gov-

ernment transferred funds to directly aid ordinary people. Today we find ourselves on the precipice of an economic and environmental catastrophe the litany of which is known by heart—Peak Oil, Climate Change, and environmental devastation due to increased pollution. Then there are the secondary effects - international resource wars, mass migrations, and pandemics. As a future unfolds far worse than the horrors of the 1930s Depression, it's time for a thorough and popular discussion of an industrial policy that goes far beyond the confines of Roosevelt's.

Focusing on a vulnerable area of capitalism—jobs— may initiate a critical public discussion about a new and equitable industrial policy, with the demand for green jobs serving as the catalyst. But without a definition of green jobs, we are reduced to the perennial call for full employment and the usual inconsequential political effect. A definition will serve as a guideline for creating corporate performance standards. Truly sustainable criteria may prevent corporations from adopting Human Resource Department greenwashing that will define green jobs in terms that merely support the current industrial policy.

Corporate heads will resist accountability, but after two decades of fighting corporate malfeasance, the public has become receptive to the idea of pressuring and coercing socially responsible behavior out of big business. It should not be assumed that the corporations will be able to amass an effective opposition to calls for progressive change.

The last thing to do, even with improved standards, will be to debate the specifics of green-collar jobs. Continuing to tout green jobs as good-paying and socially useful, why not also create a demand for free skills training, not only

for new green-collar jobs, but also for the industrial jobs vacated as the current generation of skilled workers retires?

Across the country, manufacturers have voiced alarm that there is no labor pool of young trained workers. From the late 1970s through the early 1990s, trade school classes were scuttled from high school and community college curriculums in the false view that all new jobs would be high-tech ones: blue work shirts replaced by white lab coats.

Revenue-starved education budgets fueled this trend, in the same way that offshoring manufacturing caused many unions to downsize their apprenticeship programs, if not eliminate them entirely. A bleak future for a labor force equipped with mechanical skills seemed inevitable.

The need for a new crop of skilled workers to replace the retirees has mobilized, in some communities, a response by unions, junior colleges, and local governments to establish pioneering educational ventures using limited local resources. Significantly, many manufacturers, and even some sections of the business community, recognize the value of skills training.

It can't be stressed enough that, unless the U.S. educates a new generation of skilled workers, much of the infrastructural work—such as rebuilding failing bridges, replacing weak levees, and laying high speed rails—will be impossible to accomplish.

If massive federal funding is earmarked to initiate these essential construction projects, Roosevelt's political script (to provide good jobs for the unemployed) will be updated by the push to create green-collar jobs. For example, instead of simply rebuilding the old bridges,

why not design them with fewer auto lanes and expanded public transit lanes to allow for light rail and bikes? New levees can be built higher, both for safety and to allow water flows to fill low-lying areas. And why not restrict new construction projects to fit a sustainable land use perspective that incorporates economic justice? The public discussion about good green jobs should also encompass a meaningful examination of social-serving employment.

Technical skills, from the factory floor to the universities, must be developed in order to begin the re-industrialization of America; not in imitation of the old mega-factories like Ford's River Rouge plant in Detroit, but smarter, more decentralized models. A new engineering technology that responds to the needs of local production must be encouraged to develop. Re-using material gleaned locally, such as a metal fabricator, could produce (with the aid of computerized resources) a variety of parts for a wide range of uses. The small rubber fabricators erected near refuse dumps in the developing world can serve as a model for this sort of local

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re-use. Clean, small pulping mills, like those being developed in Europe, could likewise re-make paper products. The possibilities of re-industrialization are endless if the goal is to achieve a truly sustainable material environ-

ment, and the engineering techniques are freed from the constrictions of the profit motive.

The implications of an industrial policy that consciously creates useful jobs, not the demeaning jobs that are currently offered to the disenfranchised, won't be lost on many.

The greater availability of socially responsible jobs can ultimately change general attitudes regarding work, as a higher value can be placed on the nature of the work itself. The displaced rewards we now associate with bearing up under grueling, mind/spirit-destroying labor could be history.

Imagine. What if the weekend, instead of serving as a frantic escape into consumerism, actually became an occasion to visit the good work performed by others? As far-fetched as this may sound, something like it happened in the 1930s when people, using public transportation, visited national parks made serviceable by the formerly unemployed. Or attended public fairs and theater productions to see performances with actors paid by government checks.

There are major implications of a new industrial policy that go to the very core of the economic system we currently endure—the military-industrial enterprises. This sector of our economy may not provide qualitatively less socially useful work than the advertising and public relations sectors, but it certainly wastes more resources. This is obvious to all—thus, the seemingly bottomless budgets and the economic penetration of the military-industrial complexes into all communities requires a solid alternative proposal. Rebuilding the failing infrastructure, retooling local manufacturing, and developing an alternative energy economy—all financed by diverting wasteful military expen-

ditures—outlines a program that the peace movement could support. This movement could join forces with unions, environmentalists, and economic justice groups to further the cause.

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As radical as this proposal may sound, it needs even greater depth. For example, the service industry and the non-profit sector (which is a subset of the service industry) must become part of the discussion—the business sections of newspapers often neglectfully leave these sectors out of the economic realm. It would be foolhardy to ignore these workers' jobs (which are often the most exploited jobs, despite the integral roles they play in local economies) when formulating a new industrial policy. The service sector is a hotbed for precarious employment.

It should come as no surprise that the service sector jobs are unionizing faster than those in any other employment area. Although unionization has garnered more dignity for people in these jobs, it fails within the context of a new industrial policy. There are jobs in the service sector, including the non-profits, that are in danger of being eliminated. These sectors have grown to huge proportions due to a large, poor, and desperate population that is eager for income. Without these recruits, who would do these jobs? Would they disappear as unneces-

sary, or be automated out of existence? Would office staff clean their own workspaces?

As for those tasks that are socially necessary, and poorly funded by public revenues and private foundations, a new approach must be sought after in order to protect and expand them—and not one that relies on recent college graduates who are just beginning to build their resumes.

One sound approach would be to implement a guaranteed minimum income program. If this program were fully funded to afford all workers with the basic elements of a dignified existence—covering shelter, food, and a modest stipend for social needs—it would bring use one step closer to equitable employment (that is, if no penalty were introduced to prevent an income earned beyond the minimum). This program would allow those who chose to increase their basic incomes to pursue those jobs that are socially useful, but that may pay very little. These jobs might be part-time, and maybe two or more could be taken on to add variety

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to one's life. A guaranteed income program would reduce the need to perform drudge work, while creating more employment options for people who wouldn't otherwise have the economic luxury of helping out in a school or assisting the disabled.

A national income subsidy program may sound utopian, but the idea of a basic, guaranteed income is currently being discussed worldwide as an alternative to the multitude of social welfare programs provided by countries more enlightened than ours (for example, the Irish and South African parliaments are now considering it). The Brazilians have already implemented it on a small scale by providing funds to families as compensation for their loss of income when they send their children to school—it has been widely recognized as the most successful program that Brazil's President Lula has introduced.⁴

Assuring a basic income will sever the oppressive link between jobs and income. The decision to work one job or another as a consequence of market forces contradicts the principles of a democratic society and devalues socially necessary employment. With more time and personal resources available, a path towards a sustainable society will open up more readily. We'll have the time and the freedom to create a democratic society and act more communally.

In order to minimize the effects of unbridled global capitalism, we must embrace a perspective that places people before the pursuit of profit—this will require critical thinking on a number of different levels. The control of the economy by the rich and the powerful presumes the self-destructive behavior of people who uncritically obey authority and fear scarcity (e.g., in the form of lost income). The currently dire global crisis tests our ability to overcome our social conditioning.

We need to put together an agenda. First, we must develop a (malleable) vision of a cooperative way to live together, as a work in

progress. Next, we'll need an attainable goal to strive toward. Finally, we must identify the steps it will take us to reach this end. The vision of an eco-economy—a society that serves to sustain humanity, while consciously taking environmental considerations into account—cannot be chiseled in stone, nor can our goals be static. But this doesn't mean that our quest can't begin. Legitimate popular participation requires constant feedback. The vision, the goals, and the means to that end will develop through a process of constant refinement

aimed to strengthen and deepen our vision's impact.

If the common vision is of a society that meets human needs, and the goals are collaborative projects designed to enhance a sense of community, then we will need to pursue steps that are geared toward expanding the possibilities of useful work. In order to begin this process, we will need to define what that work entails. We cannot focus on the details of useful employment without constantly referencing our goals and our vision. ■

Notes

1. Those who grow increasingly pessimistic with the daily revelations of global warming's apocalyptic consequences might ponder this phenomenon: what was nowhere on the political radar two years ago currently assumes the status of a "no-brainer."
2. <http://www.apolloalliance.org/>.
3. As one of their so-called efficiencies, the large centralized sites employ fewer workers. But the smaller, more decentralized sites that employ larger (and locally culled) workforces are more efficient in terms of energy allocation. Local employment should be our goal.
4. <http://www.usbig.net/index.html>.