



LABOR NETWORK  
FOR SUSTAINABILITY

# Why green jobs should be union jobs

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Thousands of “green jobs” have been created by President Obama’s stimulus package; millions more will be created by proposed climate legislation; tens of millions will be required to create the low-carbon economy that scientists say is necessary for the survival of the earth as we know it. Further, nearly all existing jobs will have to be made “greener” as existing workplaces convert to more climate-friendly production. Both new and existing jobs that contribute to reducing the emission of carbon and other greenhouse gasses (GHGs) have come to be known as “green jobs.”

Environmentalists and the public should ensure that the new green jobs provide the right to have a union, and then encourage the workers to organize and employers to recognize and cooperate with them. Here’s why.

**Ensuring green jobs are good jobs.** In a time of soaring unemployment, inadequate incomes, and deteriorating conditions in America’s workplaces, the idea of creating millions of well-paid, stable jobs by investing in environmental protection has won wide support. But what are touted as green jobs can all too easily instead be minimum wage jobs with poor working conditions without job security or benefits. When that’s the case, the economic benefits that have won public support for environment-protecting green jobs turn out to be an illusion – and public support is likely to evaporate.

The surest way to see that green jobs are good jobs is for workers to organize in unions that can bargain with their employers to ensure appropriate standards on the job. Only when workers are organized can they insist on decent wages, rules for safe and decent work practices, protections against arbitrary harassment and discrimination, and security and stability on the job. While public policies can and should support such standards, they are almost impossible to enforce unless workers are organized on the job and able to support each other in bargaining with their employer.

**Empowering environmental guardians on the job.** Workers have a strong stake in making their workplaces safe from environmental hazards, and in protecting their communities and the wider world from workplace-originated pollution. But in workplaces without union rights and representation workers are often intimidated from raising such concerns; the rule is likely to be, “shut up or get fired.” Unions have often empowered workers to demand their employers be environmentally responsible and to serve as whistleblowers when they aren’t. In a famous example, the union protected the right of EPA employees to speak out in the public interest when the Bush administration tried to silence them for telling the truth about global warming. Workers with

union protections have often served as the eyes, ears, and voice of the community in the workplace.

**Training the green workforce.** Even though millions of workers are unemployed and looking for work, the emerging green industries are full of bottlenecks because there is a shortage of workers with the right training. Unions are already playing a significant role in recruiting, training, and placing workers in those jobs. For example, **Electrical Workers (IBEW)** Local 683 in Columbus, Ohio, recently launched “Working Green,” a new section on its website featuring the latest news about green jobs for members, contractors, and others looking to break into the new energy economy. The Utility Workers Union (UWUA) has established the “Power4America” Training and Development Trust Fund to provide training and apprenticeship for new energy initiatives.

In existing jobs, properly trained workers are crucial to avoiding poor practices that harm the environment; unions are a key source of pressure to ensure adequate training in environmentally-sound practices. In oil refineries, for example, unions have long fought for and won more adequate staffing and training. The United Association (UA), which represents plumbers and pipefitters, recently established a Certificate Program in “green awareness” for experienced trades workers. The National Labor College is adding a new Green Workplace Representative Certificate Curriculum.

**Greening the labor movement.** Organized labor, which once largely ignored or even opposed measures for climate protection, has become an enthusiastic advocate for green jobs, and has increasingly portrayed itself as a supporter of climate protection. But it still has a long way to go; for example, it still opposes the targets for carbon emission reduction that climate scientists say are necessary. Creating a broad swath of labor union membership that depends on green jobs will create more pressure for strong pro-environment policies in the labor movement.

**Strengthening the labor-environmental coalition.** Nothing could do more to strengthen labor’s commitment to its alliance with the environmental movement than concrete evidence that greening grows labor’s ranks. When organized labor sees the value of that alliance it can deliver real results: For example, the Teamsters union reversed its long-maintained support of oil drilling in the ANWAR Arctic preserve because it decided its alliance with the environmental movement was more important. The United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club formed the Blue Green Alliance (BGA), which now includes other unions and environmental groups, to deepen labor-environmentalist coalition work and fight together for green jobs. The Sierra Club’s support for the Employee Free Choice Act had a significant impact on organized labor’s support for environmental protection – it was one of the main factors that led the Teamsters to pull out of the ANWAR drilling coalition, for example. The joint union-community campaign to clean up the Los Angeles ports has led to a major reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by one of California’s leading polluters; labor’s commitment was greatly strengthened by a joint community-labor strategy that would make it possible for port drivers to join a union.

**Creating a political force to protect and expand green jobs.** Organized labor is already serving as a primary force supporting the green jobs programs in the Obama stimulus package and in proposed climate legislation. If green jobs are union jobs, organized labor will have an interest not only in creating them, but in protecting them against counterattack so that they become part of a green transformation of the economy.

**Countering unilateral corporate power.** Protecting the public interest is such hard work primarily because of the enormous power exercised by corporate private interests. Unions are perhaps the single most powerful countervailing force, helping redress the imbalance between corporations and the public in the political arena. Expanding union membership is a crucial means to counterbalance corporate power over a wide range of issues.

**Corporate accountability and transparency.** Unions control large pension funds and they have increasingly been using their investments to demand socially responsible policies. Labor helped found Ceres, a network of investors, environmental organizations, and other public interest groups that promotes green investment to encourage sustainability. It has similarly been involved the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which promotes disclosure on economic, environmental, and social performance through its Sustainability Reporting Framework. Increasing union membership will increase labor's ability to help demand corporate social responsibility and transparency. A large membership of green workers, organized with the help of environmental and other allies, will give organized labor a further incentive to use its financial clout for environmental and other public interest purposes.

**Fighting the Right.** Efforts to fight global warming and protect the environment have been blocked by an organized rightwing ideology that willfully substitutes fantasy for scientific reality and opposes as an un-American, Communist plot anything that involves collective social regulation. Progress on environmental and indeed all progressive concerns depends on reducing the power of the right to block reforms. Organized labor is one of the strongest forces opposing the right, and it is bound to be a dedicated fighter for that purpose because the right opposes labor both ideologically and organizationally. Further, organized labor is able to reach out to many of the same constituencies as the right, educating them to grasp their interest in social solutions rather than go-it-alone individualism. For both reasons, strengthening organized labor and increasing its membership and influence is in the public interest and in the interest of the environment.

**Rebuilding strong communities and the middle class.** It is no accident that the Obama administration's green jobs initiative has been spearheaded by Vice-President Joe Biden's "Middle Class Taskforce." The expansion of green jobs is likely to be at the center of any effort to counter the erosion of good jobs and job standards that has decimated the American middle class. With help and inspiration from labor-backed groups like Green for All, union training and recruitment programs are already creating pathways out of poverty for people in America's most deprived urban and rural areas. Further, such jobs are mostly likely to be and to remain "good jobs" as well as "green jobs" if the workers in them are organized and able to mobilize the

training and recruitment programs are already creating pathways out of poverty for people in America's most deprived urban and rural areas. Further, such jobs are mostly likely to be and to remain "good jobs" as well as "green jobs" if the workers in them are organized and able to mobilize the support of other workers determined to make them that way. Finally, workers are most likely to support environmental protection and other progressive social measures if they are part of a broader program that offers a better way of life for all.

**Building a more democratic society.** The effort to build a sustainable world is only likely to succeed if it is part of a broad, multifaceted movement that addresses a wide range of the issues that touch people's lives. Whether it is universal healthcare, protecting the environment, or ensuring justice on the job, people need a broad alliance that can move society in a more progressive direction. For the past thirty years, Corporate America and the rightwing have conducted a "class war" to weaken the labor movement precisely to hobble one of the main forces supporting such progress. Conversely, building a more democratic society is most likely to succeed if it includes rebuilding the labor movement. The rapidly expanding green sector is a crucial place to start.

**Making green jobs union jobs.** The US Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establish the right of all people to self-organization and self-expression. American labor law and International Labor Organization agreements to which the US is a party guarantee the right to organize, bargain collectively, and take concerted action on the job. These rights are often compromised by courts and government agencies that are biased against workers. As we create a rapidly expanding sector of government-promoted green industry, we should ensure that such rights are incorporated from the beginning.

A robust version of these rights should be incorporated as an enforceable employer code of conduct in all government contracts for "green jobs." Workers alleging violation of the code should have access to an independent tribunal that can order correction of the violation or, if violations are frequent, termination of the contract. The code of conduct should include:

- The right of workers to freedom of speech.
- The right of workers to assemble.
- The right of workers to petition for redress of grievances.
- The right to concerted action as guaranteed in the National Labor Relations Act even to workers not represented by unions.
- The right to employer neutrality regarding efforts to unionize.

It is the job not only of the labor movement, but also of everyone who understands the value of making green jobs union jobs, to ensure those basic rights. And it is our job to provide support and encouragement for workers

who want to organize. If workers' right to make their own decision about unions is truly respected, they can be trusted to make the right decision.

## Summing Up

A union brings collective bargaining, democracy on the job, protections for whistle blowers, rising standards of living, stronger tax base for the community, and much more. Overall, the standards unions negotiate help build communities up. The economic impact for the family and the community are clear. Workers who have a union receive fair pay and benefits and they have a voice on the job. They are protected against unilateral management action. When you have a collective bargaining agreement (a contract) in place, you know what your raises are going to be, and you know what your health insurance premiums are going to be – you can spend accordingly and plan your life. More tax money goes into local communities. But there's more. Unionized workers are more stable, more productive, and produce with higher quality. Unions help train and educate workers, and the protections provide a workforce with the freedom to act without recrimination. The protection a union contract provides results in a workforce empowered to blow the whistle when necessary. That means they can perform as effective worksite stewards, and therefore as effective environmental stewards.

If we want the benefits of green jobs to be sustained, we should make sure they are union jobs.