

GREEN ECONOMIES

By Van Jones

THE GREEN COLLAR ECONOMY

In Search of Eco-Equity

The accelerating environmental crisis has pushed the human family to a moment of decision. The time for debate is running out. Humanity must figure out, once and for all, if it can find a way to live with the planet.

If it cannot, you can bet that the ensuing climatic catastrophes will hit poor people and people of color first and worst. It only makes (tragic) sense that historically neglected populations will get the least support in preventing and mitigating natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina, and the government's criminal indifference to the people caught in its fury, illustrated this in chilling fashion.

But what if humanity DOES find a way to live with the planet—but doesn't find a way to live with itself? It's not a stretch, based on what we've seen so far.

In America, the benefits of the emergent green economy have flowed almost exclusively to affluent white consumers and entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, people of color and people of modest means continue to bear a disproportionate share of the burdens associated with the failing, pollution-based economy. If green economic development continues on this course, we could end up with eco-apartheid.

Neither eco-apocalypse nor eco-apartheid is acceptable. Both are avoidable. But only if we know what it is we are fighting for.

THE VISION: ECO-EQUITY

Let's start with the urgent and immediate: we want a world that is not imperiled by global warming, where we do not have to worry that we are in the final countdown to the last generation of humanity.

But the world we dream of has more than just a stable, healthy climate. We dream of a society that also takes care of its people, where no one is left behind and everyone has a chance to succeed. That society upholds three basic principles: equal protection for all, equal opportunity for all, and reverence for all creation. We call it “eco-equity.”

Equal Protection

As we confront both ecological devastation and economic downturn, it is obvious that the most vulnerable of us will bear the brunt of these twin crises. They will feel the pains first. They will be hurt the worst. And they will have the hardest time putting their lives back together once the storm passes. It is a moral and political imperative that we protect EVERYONE from the disasters that are coming. We saw in New Orleans what happens when we ignore this imperative: many lose their lives, and many more lose their livelihoods.

Equal Opportunity

As the new “clean and green” economy emerges, there will be countless opportunities for people to improve their work, wealth and health. Those opportunities must be available to everyone—especially those people who have found opportunities so hard to come by in the pollution-based economy. People of color need to get in on the ground floor if we're to have any shot at getting a fair shake in this new economy. If not, it will be tainted by the same racial and class stratification that has for so long prevented America from fulfilling its promise of freedom.

Reverence

Here in the United States, we have been acting as if we have a disposable planet—and disposable people. A couple of statistics bring this into sharp and disturbing relief. We have just 4% of the world's population. But we emit a quarter of the world's greenhouse gases. And we jail a quarter of the world's prisoners. We seem to have no qualms about throwing anything away, from resources, to species, to neighborhoods, to children. We need to correct that. The green economy must be built on a fundamental respect and reverence for all creation, all life, both human and non-human.

A future based on these three principles is one worth fighting for, working for, living for.

But knowing what we want the future to look like does not tell us how to get there.

THE VEHICLE: A GREEN NEW DEAL

Make no mistake about it. Reversing global warming and achieving eco-equity will not be easy. We cannot get there by doing more of what we've been doing. We cannot drill and burn our way out of this crisis. But, working together, we can invent and invest our way out.

To do so, we have to radically change our economy, our politics and our culture. Such a shift will require collective will and effort on a scale not seen in this country for generations.

When I think about what we need to do, I think about the New Deal. The New Deal was a massive and deliberate reorganization of the country's resources and priorities, all with an aim to end the Great Depression and restructure American society to manage 20th century capitalism. We need a similar endeavor to reverse global warming and restructure our society for the 21st century.

Think about the work necessary to re-balance earth's ecosystem. Installing millions of solar panels. Manufacturing millions of wind-turbine parts. Planting and caring for millions of trees. Building millions of plug-in hybrid vehicles. Constructing thousands of solar farms, wind farms, and wave farms.

That's millions of jobs, provided by thousands of entrepreneurs, producing billions of dollars of wealth.

That is also a million headaches, missteps and failures if we aren't moving forward together as a country, united. After eight years of the most divisive presidential administration in memory, it is time for the federal government to once again inspire the country and bring it together.

We need a comprehensive and coordinated suite of programs designed to put the country to work repairing the planet. Piecemeal, patchwork policies will not be enough. Only a concerted effort will unite the country the way we need to get the job done. The wonderful thing is that, along with giving us a chance to reverse global warming, such an effort will give us a chance to put millions of people to work and create powerful new engines of wealth creation.

Instead of taking the side of the polluters, the warmongers, the incarcerators, we need the government to become a partner to the innovators, the scientists, the eco-entrepreneurs, the neighborhood heroes, the ones who are close to both the problems and the solutions. We cannot drill and burn our way out of this crisis. But we can invent and invest our way out.

THE ALLIANCE: CROSS-CLASS, CROSS-RACE, CROSS-EVERYTHING

A Green New Deal would be a massive political undertaking. It cannot happen without a strong, durable, and broad-based coalition with the political muscle to move such a comprehensive agenda. It will not be easy. The

current economy, based on pollution and exclusion, still has many powerful supporters entrenched in Washington and on Wall Street.

No, it will not be easy. But it is necessary, and possible. Once again, the experience of the original New Deal is instructive.

The New Deal was not simply the brainchild of FDR and his allies in Congress. It had the support of a powerful electoral coalition that included farmers, workers, ethnic minorities, students, intellectuals, progressive bankers, and forward-thinking business leaders.

We need a similar alliance now—a “Green Growth Alliance.” The program we are suggesting can attract that kind of support. It has something for almost everybody—workers, environmentalists, activists, students, people of faith, small farmers, progressive business and finance leaders, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and scientists.

And, yes, people of color.

This is our best shot to advance a serious racial justice agenda on a national level. A brand new economy is emerging. If we are smart and willing to work, we can make sure our communities’ needs and perspectives are built into this new economy from the beginning.

Most importantly, this could provide the material basis to pull our communities out of the spiral of violence and suffering that has engulfed them since deindustrialization began. The economic crisis, environmental devastation and a dearth of hope or common purpose may be new on the national scene, but they showed up in our neighborhoods first. They are still sharpest in our communities. But now we have a chance to change that.

The generations before us fought to racially integrate the poisonous, pollution-based economy. The best way to honor them now and continue their legacy is to make sure that the new, clean and green economy has a place for everyone from the beginning.

THE ACTION: WHAT TO DO RIGHT NOW

Whether you are part of a powerful organization or an interested individual, there are steps you can take to help forge this Green New Deal.

Support the Clean Energy Corps.

On September 27, Green For All launched a national campaign to establish a Clean Energy Corps (CEC). A successor to the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, the CEC would be a combined service, training, and employment effort. Concentrated in cities and neglected communities, it would aim to combat global warming, grow local and regional economies and demonstrate the equity and employment promise of the clean energy economy.

Over time, the CEC would seek to develop “green pathways out of poverty” for at least 1 million people. This means providing them with the training, work experience, job placement, and other services needed to gain family-supporting jobs within the green economy economy. The CEC would directly engage millions of Americans in diverse service and volunteer work related to climate protection. And it would create financing mechanisms that would allow the pooling of public and private capital to cover the up-front costs that currently pose a significant barrier to broad-scale retrofitting and environmental restoration, and the associated creation of numerous community jobs.

This kind of national effort holds the seed of a Green New Deal. You can help plant that seed by signing the “I’m Ready” petition online at <http://www.greenjobsnow.com/hq/ready-petition>. If you work with or know of local

programs similar to those we propose in the CEC, let us know. The more that we can point to existing programs, the easier it will be for others to understand what an exciting opportunity the CEC is.

Check back with us often at <http://www.greenforall.org> to get the latest information on how you can support the Clean Energy Corps.

Local Action and the Green Jobs Pledge

The Clean Energy Corps is a national proposal, but the green economy is already growing in cities, counties and towns all over the country. That's why Green For All, the Apollo Alliance, Center for American Progress, and ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability have issued a joint call to action to build a green economy from the bottom up.

You can do a lot to help create the green-collar economy right where you live.

It starts with getting your mayor to sign the Local Government Green Jobs Pledge (<http://www.greenforall.org/resources/policy-legislation/local-government-green-jobs-pledge>). This will affirm your community's commitment to green-collar jobs, build public will and raise the visibility of this crucial issue. More than a dozen cities have already signed on. Don't let yours fall behind the pack.

Local government is not enough, though. You also need to bring other stakeholders to the table. Get your local government to establish a Green-Collar Jobs Taskforce, with stakeholders from labor, business, the workforce development sector, community groups, schools and advocates. Together, their expertise, political capital and resources can do more for the green economy than any of them could do alone.

With the support of local government and the stakeholders in the Green-Collar Jobs Taskforce, your city can create a local green economic action plan. Build your plan around local priorities, business conditions, and economic strengths. The plan should accomplish two basic things: creating demand for green-collar workers (job creation) and preparing a workforce to meet that demand (job training). Create green-collar jobs with policies, investment, and incentives that expand the market for green products and services. Prepare a green-collar workforce by building on existing training programs that provide job seekers with "pathways out of poverty" and family-supporting, career-track jobs.

Make no mistake about it. Our world is in peril. And if the ship is taking on water, then our communities are already neck deep and deeper. But with quick, decisive and collective action, we can meet the challenges of the new century.