

## Green Economy Jobs: Who Will Get Them?

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A couple of years ago, I had the misfortune of being the second keynote speaker behind Van Jones, the founder of the Green for All organization and the "Green Collar Economy," before a group of 20 and 30 something's in California. Part of it is age. He graduated from Yale Law School nearly 20 years after I did. But most of it was his message of connecting a Green Economy as a way for inner-city residents out of poverty by getting high-wage jobs in a vibrant new sector.

My speech, if I remember, focused on the traditional construction trades, i.e., electricians, plumbers, carpenters, and the racial barriers to those unionized trades which are a fact of life in New York and many other American cities. The audience was right to be excited by Van's vision; he was connecting two separate themes that excite progressives young and old, finding a serious way out of poverty, and turning the United States into a Green Economy.

The Tea Party right wing managed to derail Van's position as White House environmental adviser based on his record as an outspoken advocate for the poor, but has done nothing to dampen the hope that work in the Green Economy can provide a new opportunity for inner-city young people and not so young people to find high-wage work.

Van's ideas had already caught fire even before the BP oil disaster. I just spoke at a graduation ceremony at STRIVE for a group of young men and women, most with criminal convictions, who had gotten through the first stage of a program to prepare them for Green Jobs. Jobs in this sector include weatherization, solar panel installation, and wind technology. It should be a way of leapfrogging over some of the traditional union barriers to African-American and Latino hiring that has plagued New York City for generations - hopefully with the active support of organized labor.

I've expressed only one serious concern to Van Jones about his concept - that the new Green Jobs may require even more basic education and skills than the old economy jobs and that's precisely what cities like New York have been failing to provide, particularly for African-American and Latino males. In particular, despite strong statements by Mayor Bloomberg as to his commitment to a Green City, we haven't seen enough movement in the

city's schools to train young people in the basic skills that would make them competitive for the new work.

As I've mentioned in a previous blog, New York State and City have nearly 1.3 million working age people without a high school diploma and have an appallingly high dropout rate for young people of color. In addition, despite efforts at reform, the city's vocational education system (now called Career and Technical Education) lags the rest of the nation on almost every measure.

I served on the Mayor's Commission on Construction Opportunity, led by Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff, a few years ago. It had members of the administration, leaders from the construction trade unions, developers, and a handful of advocates. Some of the most heated conversations at the commission were about racial exclusion by some of the trades, but in the end the unions were able to make a strong case that entry level jobs in all the trades required at least a high school diploma or GED.

The need to read well and calculate is critical given the kind of construction jobs going on in the city now. Perhaps a generation ago a carpenter could get away without being able to read complex blueprints, but no more.

So for us to realize Van Jones's vision, we have to make certain that virtually no one is allowed to leave school without a high school credential, and if we're really serious about high-wage Green Jobs, the city has to make a major investment in reconfiguring its Career and Technical programs to meet the demands that the city has already made a priority.