

COVER STORY

Welcome to Green-Collar America

Does the Future of the American Middle Class Lie in Sustainable Business?

By Brita Belli

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The American middle class—of which some 80 percent of Americans claim to be a part—is getting anxious. While there is no carved-in-stone edict about what it means to be middle class, it's the term that Americans hang their dreams on. It suggests earning enough to get by without struggling; being able to afford health care, college costs and the occasional trip to Disney World. The middle-class ideal is tied to earning power, and it's there that confidence is eroding. Over the last five years, while most workers' incomes have increased slowly or not at all, costs have reached record levels. Housing costs are up 23 percent, college costs up 44 percent and health insurance costs up 71 percent.

And while the traditional economic outlook is bleak, the green economy is taking shape, bringing with it the promise of well-paying manufacturing jobs; of management and sales opportunities with huge growth potential and lots of niche positions for enterprising students and job seekers looking for alternative careers. On the upper tiers of the economic ladder, many CEOs and CFOs are already jumping into green jobs, and online green job directories are heavy with listings for those with established business experience.

What remains to be seen is if the career ladders appearing in every sector, from green building to organic farming, solar installation and sustainable marketing, are available to all or to a select few. With the momentum behind environmental issues, Congress, spurred by advocacy organizations such as the Apollo Alliance and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, is responding with legislation that could ensure a place for America's disadvantaged and disenfranchised in the new green economy. For that to happen, the House version of the new energy legislation—spearheaded by Hilda Solis (D-CA) and John Tierney (D-MA)—has to make it through Congress and past President George W. Bush's threatened veto.

The Green Jobs Act, which passed the House as part of the Energy Bill last August with a vote of 241 to 172, contains specific language about using the green economy as a "pathway out of poverty." Of the \$125 million that would be set aside for job training in renewable energy, energy-efficient vehicles and green building, \$25 million of that would be earmarked specifically for those most difficult to hire: at-risk youths, former inmates and welfare recipients. The Energy Savings Act of 2007 sponsored by Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Hilary Clinton (D-NY) in the Senate allows for \$100 million in training for "green-collar jobs," but is not geared specifically toward low-income Americans.

That, says Van Jones, president of the Ella Baker Center, is a critical difference. "There's this whole invisible infrastructure trying to get people who need jobs connected with work," says Jones. "There are vocational training centers, return-from-prison work centers, community colleges. But none of that infrastructure is pointed at the green economy. There are a lot of 'certificate factories' pointed at the pollution-based economy, and lots of people going to night school for jobs that aren't there any more."

The Green Jobs Act is a way of "repurposing our job training," says Jones. He testified before Congress in favor of the bill—a national version of the Green Jobs Corps his organization established in Oakland, California—and says the shortage of skilled workers throughout the renewable energy sector is already leading eco-entrepreneurs to hire their college buddies. But there's a larger issue at stake. Unless the green economy is designed to include America's urban youth, they are bound to be overlooked, shuffled back into the same low-wage, go-nowhere retail and fast food jobs with little opportunity for improvement.

"The work of saving the polar bears and poor kids is the same work," says Jones. "If we give the jobs to the



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people who most need them, we solve two problems.”

Many say that \$100 to \$125 million is miniscule money for such a major economic transition. But the government’s initial investment is only meant to be a launch pad, says Kevin Doyle, president of green consulting and training company Green Economy. “The federal government serves best as an innovative leader,” he says. “Money from the private sector should be at least five times that much.”

Companies taking the risk of implementing new, sustainable technologies won’t be eager to bear the cost of training unskilled workers. And that incentive is needed, especially in the educational system, to create a workforce that’s ready for the new economy. Until sustainable practices move from testing phase to the norm, as they have in green building, companies need a reason to make the switch. “All economic activity has to be financed,” says Doyle. “There are no jobs without money.” At the same time, he notes, “We are reaching the tipping point where cost incentives no longer have to come from some strange amalgam of tax incentives. Green is tipping into the mainstream.”

Green on Top

The green economy has already opened doors for those in the upper echelon of the business world, the managers, directors, CEOs and CFOs.

“CEOs and senior-level people across a broad spectrum are entering the environmental field in droves,” says Rona Fried, founder and president of SustainableBusiness.com which includes a “Green Dream Jobs” online directory. “They’re saying ‘I’m the CEO of an IT company and I want to put my skills to work for the environment. How do I make that transition?’”

As corporations build environmental strategy into their policy, partnering with nonprofits and responding more quickly to rising public concern for environmental issues, they need strong communicators. “Many companies have environmental managers that are now being upgraded in terms of status,” says Dan Esty, director of the Center for Business and Environment at Yale University, and co-author of *Green to Gold: How Smart Companies Use Environmental Strategy to Innovate, Create Value and Build Competitive Advantage*. “To be a successful environmental manager, you need good analytic skills, to understand the environment in a business context—as a core business strategy.”

That’s the advice Esty gives his Yale students: if they want to improve the environment, they should find ways to help companies tackle the issues that are important to them—be it safe drinking water, less urban pollution or protecting the rainforest.

And the growing partnerships between corporations and environmental activist groups have created jobs on both sides of the aisle. Greenpeace and Coca-Cola are now collaborating on hydrofluorocarbon (HFC)- and chlorofluorocarbon (CFC)-free refrigeration equipment. Other high-profile partnerships include Chiquita and the Rainforest Alliance, which vastly improved that company’s labor and environmental practices in Latin America; and McDonald’s with (among others) Environmental Defense which led to the fast-food chain eliminating those wasteful Styrofoam containers. “There are many more jobs today focused at managing the business-environmental interface,” says Esty.

The 300 largest corporations are in the initial stages of crafting a new social frontier, writes author Bruce Piasecki in *World Inc*. “Enlightened self-interest is what fuels the global equity culture, from the search for fuel cells and biofuels to new ways to package and new ways to power our economy, transportation and computing infrastructure,” writes Piasecki, president and founder of consulting firm the American Hazard Control Group. “Business first seeks to sustain and further itself, but this revolution has the side benefit of being good for us all.”

While green jobs are often touted as a way to create a solid American workforce, it’s the installation and maintenance jobs in solar and wind that can’t be outsourced. “The technology, where a big part of the upper

The new “green collar”
economy could restore
a rapidly disintegrating
American middle class.

money is...it's not at all clear the U.S. will win that game," says Doyle. "Right now there are a lot of technology companies in Spain, Japan and Switzerland."

Turning Blue Collars Green

But those in-country manufacturing jobs are not to be taken lightly. They represent a huge possibility for a new "green-collar" economy to restore a rapidly disintegrating American middle class. The 10 Midwestern states, ideally suited for wind energy development, could see nearly 37,000 new jobs by 2020, according to the Environmental Law and Policy Center, if the nation's renewable energy portfolio were set to 22 percent. According to a University of California at Berkeley study in 2004 (and updated in 2006), "Putting Renewables to Work: How Many Jobs Can the Clean Energy Industry Generate?" the renewable industry consistently produced more jobs per megawatt of electricity generated in construction, manufacturing, installation, operations and management and fuel processing than the fossil fuel industries. With a 20 percent national renewable energy standard that included 55 percent wind energy, that would equal 188,018 new jobs by 2020.

Unless the green economy includes urban youth, they will be shuttled into low-wage, go-nowhere retail and fast food jobs.

Kate Gordon, program director for the Apollo Alliance, a nonprofit working for American energy independence, says, "There's been a wholesale loss of manufacturing jobs, which are union-protected, highly skilled jobs. But with wind turbines, solar panels, energy-efficient retrofits—there's a whole world of green jobs. It's pretty exciting if you can harness it."

Both recent college graduates and professionals looking to redirect their careers need to find ways to plug into this new green economy. As those pathways from conventional to green are still being laid, that's not always easy. But Doyle, who offers consulting and training for the new green economy, says there are two key strategies. One is to look at what skills are needed by all industries to solve environmental problems. All need information management and financing. "So much starts with gathering huge amounts of data," Doyle says. This includes jobs in information technology, geography and statistics. And whether a nonprofit, a government agency or a business is looking to purchase open space, or evaluating smart growth versus sprawl, people are always needed to find funds. This opens up jobs like sector analysts, green accountants, government finance officers and foundation managers, among others.

The second strategy for green job seekers is to "pick a niche without any sense of ideological blinders," he says. Someone wanting to "fix" climate change would investigate the major sources of carbon emissions—power plants, automobiles, gas flares—and focus on finding solutions within these polluting industries.

People on the forefront of this rising green economy see enormous green growth potential within once-suspect corporate entities, from Wal-Mart to Starbucks. "At one point, five to 10 years ago, it was unusual to have an employee involved in corporate social responsibility," says Ted Ning, conference director of LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) and executive editor of the *LOHAS Journal*. "Now corporate social responsibility is a whole department for large corporations like Office Depot or Trader Joe's." Looking at the big picture, from corporate scandals to Hurricane Katrina to rising gas prices to the conservative ideology of the current administration, Ning says it's "a perfect storm—people are fed up with what's typically given to them."

Of course, as savvy marketers have realized, the conscious consumer behind many of the fastest-growing green businesses, from eco-travel to organic food to hybrid cars and Fair Trade coffee, are as seduced by the comfort and social status of these items as by their reduced carbon footprint. "People don't have to sacrifice their lifestyle anymore," says Ning. "They don't have to wear burlap or eat sand."

BRITA BELLI is managing editor of *E* (a green job!).

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