

Creating decent green jobs

Alliance of labour and environmentalists?

Many people believe that creating a green economy is at odds with protecting and creating jobs. **Jacklyn Cock** explodes this myth and shows how the labour movement and environmentalists can work together to both protect the environment and create decent work.



Solar Richmond

Trainers in a green construction programme in California install a solar panel system.

The current debate about 'green jobs' raises challenging questions for the labour and environmental movements. For example, should we promote the potential of green jobs to contribute towards reducing unemployment and environmental crises? But should we also be sceptical about 'green jobs' as an ingredient of a new 'green' capitalism which is trying to avoid fundamental change?

WHAT ARE 'GREEN' JOBS

Green jobs are at the centre of global debates on the transition to what is variously termed 'a low carbon economy' or a 'green economy'. The common element is the need for a transition to a new energy regime. There is a lot of confusion about the meaning of these terms and the New

Growth Path Framework identifies the 'green economy' as important, but does not define it.

The simplest definition of green jobs is that of the United Nations Environmental Programme, 'those in existing and new sectors which use processes and produce goods and services aimed at alleviating environmental threats.' Some prefer a more narrow focus on 'climate jobs' meaning exclusively those that tackle the main sources of carbon emissions.

Others argue for a broader approach which is not limited to moving away from a reliance on fossil fuels and building a low-carbon economy. They include attempts to provide a more sustainable and appreciative use of natural resources. This includes jobs that help to

protect ecosystems and biodiversity, reduce energy, materials and water consumption through high-efficiency strategies; de-carbonise the economy; and minimise or altogether avoid all forms of waste and pollution.

Some people believe that millions of green jobs will be created worldwide in the next 20 years. For example, according to one study, 20 million jobs will be created globally in the renewable energy sector alone by 2030.

DANGERS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change involves many 'environmental threats' particularly in relation to food and water. It is widely known that the current environmental crisis needs a transition away from fossil fuels like coal which have historically driven

industrial development towards a low carbon economy.

According to the former chief executive of BP, the transition to a low carbon economy means that 'we have before us a period of economic transition as great as, if not greater than, the Industrial Revolution'. This will involve massive social disruption, and changes in employment and livelihoods.

Many new jobs can be created in renewable energy. For example, building wind and solar power, renovating and insulating our homes and buildings and providing public transport. Also some employment will change, such as from landfill work and waste incineration to recycling.

Certain jobs will disappear, such as the production of wasteful packaging materials. Also many people in existing jobs such as plumbers, electricians and metal and construction workers will need re-training.

So it is clear that workers and their organisations like trade unions are an important force in this transition. But what is involved?

Does addressing the threat of climate change provide the opportunity to create many new jobs which could address the crisis of unemployment and promote a move away from dependence on fossil fuels towards a low carbon economy?

Does this involve transformative change? Are 'green jobs' part of capital's response to the ecological crisis, namely that the system can avoid fundamental change and continue by creating a new 'sustainable' or 'green capitalism' based on expanding markets and new technology? This 'green' market orientation is clear in government's National Climate Change Response Green Paper.

The questions become sharper if we consider the impact of climate change in two areas that are of crucial importance to working people: food and energy.

CLIMATE CHANGE & FOOD PRODUCTION

Half of South African households suffer from 'food insecurity', and one in four children under the age of six is showing signs of stunted growth. Insufficient food for the poor will increase because climate change threatens the availability of food. Future food production will lack cheap energy, abundant water and a stable climate.

Climate change means more extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods and less predictable rainfall. In sub-Saharan Africa arid areas will increase to 90 million hectares. In southern Africa it is estimated that yields from rain-fed agriculture may be reduced by up to 50% by 2020. The production

of bread's main ingredient - wheat - could disappear from Africa and there will be a decrease in the amount of maize under cultivation.

Some people argue that we need to increase local food production in ways that create new 'green' jobs while strengthening food security.

For example, it is estimated that to meet the fresh produce requirements of the Gauteng population, about 26 672 hectares of land need to be cultivated which could mean 444 538 new direct jobs.

But we should also be demonstrating that current agriculture increases climate change through its dependence on fossil fuel energy in transport, fertilizers and pesticides. This suggests that we should struggle for more than 'green jobs'. We should struggle for the right of people to sufficient, healthy food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods.

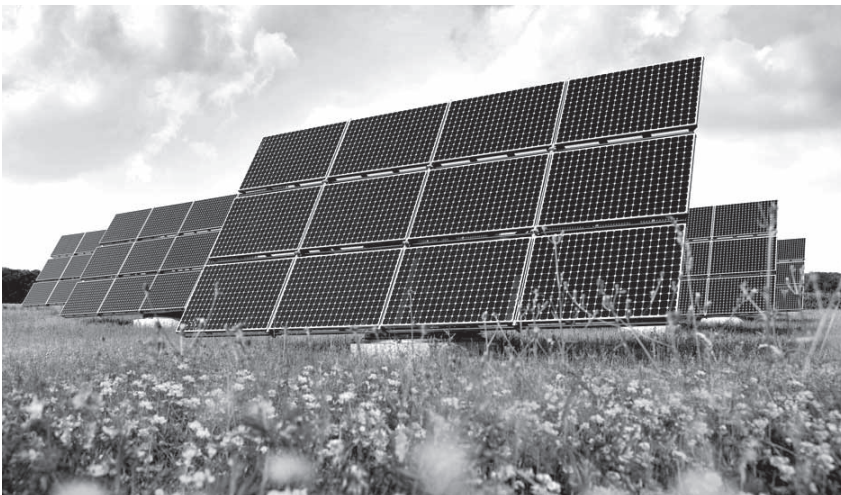
This involves replacing the present system of industrialised agriculture with 'food sovereignty'.

This means re-organising food production away from profit-driven corporations to prioritise local needs, knowledge and small farmers.

CLIMATE CHANGE & ENERGY

Millions of South African households suffer from a lack of energy. They don't have access to electricity because of lack of infrastructure or because of unaffordable pre-paid meters. They have to rely on dangerous paraffin stoves and candles, or the time-consuming collection of firewood. Also 90% of our electricity is generated through burning coal which means that it is highly polluting.

Some people argue for 'green jobs' in labour intensive renewable energy, such as solar powered water geysers. Studies show that we could get 50% of all electricity from clean, renewable resources and that this could provide over a million new jobs. Our solar potential is among the highest in the world and concentrated solar power could create 4 000 new jobs a year in Gauteng.



At the same time we should show that our present energy policy reflects the interests of capital who use mainly coal and nuclear power and have no interest in all South Africa's people getting access to clean, sustainable power.

There are many other examples of how dealing with climate change could create new jobs.

Water and waste are areas with great potential. Water shortages are worsening around the world. Technologies that help in recycling, filtering or in improving the way we use water will be vital in making the most of decreasing supplies. Government's Green Paper on responses to climate change maintains that 'water is arguably the primary medium through which the impact of climate change will be felt by people, ecosystems and economies.'

Guy Preston, the director of the Working for Water and Working for Energy programmes in the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, estimates that 2% of South Africans, energy needs could come through the use of biomass (wood, agricultural and other waste etc) over the next 15 to 20 years. In the process 50 000 jobs will be created and water of the value of up to R9-billion per year will be available. A participant at a recent workshop stated that the rainwater harvesting industry could create 50 000 jobs in five years.

DECENT GREEN JOBS

In the debate on creating a green economy, not enough attention goes to the quality of green jobs in terms of labour standards and wage levels. Decent work means jobs that pay at least a living wage, and offer training opportunities and some measure of economic and social security.

At present the debates around 'green jobs' and 'decent work' do not connect. Linking them through the demand for decent, green jobs could strengthen debates in policy discussions around how to address the environmental crisis,

particularly climate change, in a way that contributes to job creation and poverty alleviation.

The demand for decent green jobs could bring workers into alliances with environmentalists.

Environmentalists and workers should be allies, not only in advancing workplace health and safety, but also in protecting working-class communities who bear the brunt of environmental degradation. The media frequently promote a false division in labour-environmental relations as a trade-off between jobs and the environment.

As R Kazis and R Grossman write, 'Environmental protection not only creates jobs, it also saves jobs... Forestry, tourism, agriculture and the growing leisure and outdoor recreation industries are all important sources of jobs which depend directly upon clear water, clean air, and wilderness for their continuation and growth.'

A transition to clean energy will create far more jobs than it would eliminate. However, the fact that some people get new jobs provides little comfort to people and communities who could lose their jobs in coal-fired power plants for example. Therefore the international trade union movement supports a 'just transition' that protects working people.

JUST CHANGE TO LOW CARBON ECONOMY

There is a need to develop programmes for workers who lose their jobs because of climate protection policies. In the US, for example, the Green Jobs Act of 2007 authorised millions of dollars per year from the federal government to create an 'energy efficiency and renewable energy worker training program to prepare workers for jobs in a range of green industries.'

A Just Transition Coalition in the US has developed a plan for local communities to invest in solar, wind, ecotourism and job retraining. What would such a coalition involve in South Africa?

Clearly the green jobs created must meet ILO criteria of decent work, and a sustainable environment must be linked to considerations of justice. For example, justice demands that the 25% of South African households who lack access to energy should be provided with it while sustainability demands that this should take the form of clean, and affordable renewable energy.

CONCLUSION

Creating green jobs could end the fear of a low carbon future. Anthony Giddens believes that an ecological catastrophe is likely but he stresses that, 'We must create a positive model of a low-carbon future' He points out that Martin Luther King did not mobilise people to action by proclaiming, 'I have a nightmare'. Fear and anxiety are not good motivators, especially if the dangers are abstract and remote.

But the more extreme weather events experienced recently in South Africa and many in other parts of the world demonstrate that climate change is not a remote event. How we respond revolves around understanding the nature and extent of the change involved in addressing the threat of climate change.

Many people recognise the severity of the environmental crisis in the form of climate change but as D Wallis says, 'it is still not widely recognized as a capitalist crisis, that is, as a crisis arising from and perpetuated by the rule of capital, and hence incapable of resolution within the capitalist framework.'

The question then is whether the labour movement struggles only for a 'just transition' anchored in 'decent, green jobs' or in addition, focuses on the causes of the ecological crisis which means challenging the growth logic of the capitalist system. ¹⁸

Jacklyn Cock is professor emeritus in the University of the Witwatersrand's sociology department and in the Institute of Work, Development and Society.