



Health and Safety and Green Jobs



April 2009

We've reached the 21st century and the world of work is changing at a startling pace. As many traditional jobs are being lost, the new economy is ushering in much-needed "green jobs." This offers an unprecedented opportunity to guarantee from the start that these jobs are safe and healthy for both workers and communities.

While the term "green job" is still in flux, certain criteria are typically used. First, the job must have a positive impact on the environment and efficiently use natural resources. Second, the job must be economically sustainable. It should pay a living wage that can support a family, provide health care and other benefits, and offer opportunities for advancement.

These are lofty goals, but we can do even better. A green job also must promote worker and community health. Currently, every 2 ½ seconds, someone is injured or made sick from their job in this country. While going green, we need to build in safety precautions. For example, one of the major sectors of the green jobs revolution—solar panel installation—can be extremely dangerous. Without state-of-the-art fall protection systems and proper worker training, we can expect an increase in fatal falls from roof tops, a hazard that has been identified as a top priority of the National Occupational Research Agenda. Later, as buildings with solar panels are demolished, we will see workers exposed to cadmium and other toxic materials unless we plan ahead.

The 21st century should look back and learn. With the industrial revolution in the 19th century, there was a scourge of worker death and disability from asbestosis, silicosis, brown lung disease, mine cave-ins, and polluting factories. The 20th century saw a computer revolution that brought serious, unanticipated problems for computer users and manufacturers alike. There was an epidemic of repetitive strain injuries; problems with toxic chemicals used in electronics manufacturing affected both high-tech workers and local communities around the world.

Occupational injury and illness rates are already extracting too high a price, both human and monetary. A study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that the cost to the public for workplace injuries and illness is equal to that of cancer. We can make green revolution careers safe, but only if we do so by design: anticipating and addressing potential hazards; involving workers, managers, communities and enforcement agencies.

It's time to make jobs environmentally just. We must pay close attention to whether negative impacts are disproportionately burdening low-income communities and communities of color. We need to ask if it's reasonable to call solar panel installation "green" if panels are installed primarily in wealthy and white

households by low-income workers and workers of color who bear the brunt of its workplace hazards. And, how green is it really, given that the manufacture of solar panels, which creates a toxic by-product, takes place largely in China, a developing country where environmental laws are not enforced?

Now is our opportunity to push for greener manufacturing and disposal processes and address the needs of those who are most impacted. Given the green revolution and the Obama administration's interest in the environment, job creation, and social justice, we have an opportunity to ensure that worker and community health are not just afterthoughts but are front and center in the new economy. Let's let our leaders know that we want green jobs that are sustainable in every sense. Yes, we need jobs that provide a decent living. We also need jobs that keep us alive.

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