

Fighting Climate Chaos With a Green Public Works Program

The United States is one of the biggest contributors to climate change through fossil fuel emissions.¹ If we warm the planet more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, increased temperatures could cause irreversible damage, potentially making parts of the world uninhabitable this century.²

The future of energy lies in clean, renewable solar and wind power, and in energy efficiency manufacturing and installation. Shifting to 100 percent renewable energy and investing in efficiency upgrades would protect the environment, curb climate change and provide safer employment.³ However, the United States is on a fossil fuel building boom, with 364 new natural gas-fired generators and 3 coal generators planned between 2018 and 2022.⁴ We must derail the buildout, stop producing fossil fuels and rapidly transition to clean energy.

We must rapidly shift to 100 percent renewable energy to stave off the worsening effects of climate change.⁵ A shift of this magnitude would work best if implemented through national green public works programs. Like President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, they must be paired with pro-labor policies to ensure that workers share fully in the massive investments. These policies must make it easier for workers to form unions, provide a fair and just transition for existing fossil fuel workers and provide training for new workers to develop career skills.

Jobs in Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency

Renewable energy and energy efficiency are implementable approaches for stimulating job growth and diminishing the need for additional fossil fuel plants.⁶ In 2016, more American workers were already employed in the renewable energy and energy efficiency sectors (over 2.6 million jobs) than in fossil fuels (1 million jobs),⁷ and the solar and wind industries were creating jobs at rates that were 17 and 9 times faster than the rest of the economy.⁸ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that solar installers and wind turbine technicians are among the top two fastest-growing occupations.⁹ Meanwhile,



investments in energy efficiency generate nearly three times as many jobs as comparable investments in fossil fuels.¹⁰

Food & Water Watch estimated that for each megawatt, solar power creates 80 times more jobs than natural gas, and wind power creates 7 times more jobs than natural gas. In 2019, the number of jobs created from planned wind and solar electricity generation (33,354 and 233,922 jobs, respectively) are projected to significantly outpace those generated from natural gas (8,401 jobs).¹¹ Food & Water Watch also estimated in its 2019 report, *Building Climate Justice: Investing in Energy Efficiency for a Fair and Just Transition*, that a \$500 billion investment in energy efficiency from 2020 to 2035 could create 20.8 million jobs.¹²

Investing in Communities, Curbing Inequality and Ensuring a Just Transition

A green public works program would address the looming climate crisis and generate economic growth. Investments in a green economy would create jobs in manufacturing and construction for wind turbines, solar panels and energy-efficient building upgrades. Energy savings from implementing these green energy technologies can be reinvested in the economy, spurring more job-creating activity.

Green energy jobs could begin to address the widening wealth inequality in the United States that has made it impossible for working families to get ahead. Inefficient buildings and subsequent high energy burdens can force households to decide between paying for utilities or other basic necessities such as food or medical care.¹³ A national green public works program would help provide sufficient funding and grants to upgrade houses for lower-income

homeowners; reducing energy costs by one-third would deliver substantial benefits.

Additionally, a green public works program must create and reinforce a fair and just transition from fossil fuel employment to the clean energy sector. This transition should include guaranteed pensions for fossil fuel workers, training and relocation support for laid-off employees, and community transition support for regional economies that rely on fossil fuel activity, to ensure that they are able to advance clean energy projects.¹⁴

Conclusion

Continued investments sunk into pipelines, oil and gas wells, fracking and fossil fuel infrastructure lock us into a dirty energy future in defiance of climate science. The way out must be a dramatic shift to zero-emission wind and solar power, accompanied by widespread deployment of energy efficiency. The goal of 100 percent renewable energy by 2030 is achievable with the necessary political will.

Endnotes

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