

Green Collar Jobs

By Raquel Pinderhughes

Over the next decade, the potential for green collar jobs, which I define as blue-collar work force opportunities created by firms and organizations whose mission is to improve environmental quality, could be very large.¹ This is because, despite what is happening at the federal level, many San Francisco Bay Area cities, and the state of California, are proposing and passing policies and programs designed to improve environmental quality. These include policies related to zero waste, energy and water conservation, residential solar energy, whole home performance, local procurement, open space, and strengthening local food systems. In addition, the number of San Francisco Bay Area residents choosing to use their money to buy goods and services from firms and organizations that are improving environmental quality is increasing rapidly. Over time, this combination of factors should result in a significant expansion of local green collar jobs in the area. In order to find out what are the characteristics of green collar jobs? And What factors contribute to the growth and vibrancy of these sectors? I have been interviewing employers who provide green collar jobs to workers in more than 100 local firms/institutions which are producing jobs in 22 specific sectors:



- Bicycle repair and bike delivery services
- Car and truck mechanic jobs, production jobs, and gas-station jobs related to biodiesel
- Energy retrofits to increase energy efficiency and conservation
- Green building
- Green waste composting on a large scale
- Hauling and reuse of construction materials and debris (C&D)
- Hazardous materials clean-up
- Landscaping
- Manufacturing jobs related to large scale production of appropriate technologies (i.e. solar panels, bike cargo systems, green waste bins, etc.)
- Materials reuse
- Non-toxic household cleaning in residential and commercial buildings
- Parks and open space expansion and maintenance
- Printing with non-toxic inks and dyes
- Public transit jobs related to driving, maintenance, and repair
- Recycling and reuse
- Small businesses producing products from recycled materials
- Solar installation
- Tree cutting and pruning
- Peri-urban and urban agriculture
- Water retrofits to increase water efficiency and conservation
- Whole home performance, including attic insulation, weatherization, etc.

It is very clear that moving away from polluting work and towards environmentally restorative work will bring significant changes and immediate benefits to workers, communities, and society at large. We need to develop a clearer understanding of what kinds of policies and programs can ensure that green collar jobs are made available to workers with limited initial education and skills, and that these jobs are stable, living wage jobs that provide benefits to workers and their families. Do green collar jobs, in and of themselves, offer workers a supportive work experience that contributes to improvements in quality of life?

Recent research on sustainable agriculture in the U.S. has revealed that although crops are being grown with less toxic inputs, on many of these farms, workers continue to be terribly exploited. Similarly, some manufacturers producing processed food made with organic ingredients, and some supermarkets known for selling healthy organic food, offer workers part-time work employment in order to avoid providing benefits to workers and, have been involved in union busting. A job designed to improve environmental quality is not guaranteed to be a stable living wage job that provides workers with essential benefits. It is unclear if local

green collar jobs will benefit low-income people and families in the Bay Area.

If current employment patterns are any indicator, we should all be concerned about this. Currently, unemployment rates for African American adults and teenagers are more than double the rates for Whites and Asians. Among Latinos, unemployment is worsening among second-generation Latinos.

Although the overall employment rate for Latinos is equal to Whites and Asians, the unemployment rate among native born Latinos is almost twice as high as Whites. Although Asians have lower unemployment rates, Asian workers are concentrated in low-paying manufacturing and service jobs and, like African Americans and Latinos, their rates of poverty are significantly higher than Whites.

What is clear is that people of color and high school graduates are the least advantaged groups in the current labor market. In order to reduce the potential for social inequalities and injustices in the emerging green economy, we need to develop strategies and programs to ensure that workers with limited initial education and skills have access to local green collar jobs. The information I am gathering will be helpful as we take on this challenge.

My preliminary research findings reveal the following: There are many local firms/organizations that offer green collar jobs in the Bay Area. The vast majority of local green collar jobs do not require high levels of education. The majority of workers holding green collar jobs in these 22 sectors obtained their skills on the job or through training paid for by their employers. Employers describe basic work skills of being responsible, being on time, having good communication skills, etc. as the most critical skills for the green jobs they offer. Employers are willing to hire workers with limited initial education and skills.

Public policies are the most important factor contributing to the health and vibrancy of firms/organizations with missions to improve environmental quality. While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions from these preliminary findings, it is possible to make the following generalizations: First, to ensure that green collar jobs provide workers with stable living-wage jobs and benefits, we will need to support living-wage ordinances, long-term hiring contracts, and unionization options. Second, to ensure that green collar jobs are offered to workers with limited initial education and skills, we will need local hiring requirements, training for green collar jobs in high schools, work force training programs, certification programs, matching programs, and employer incentives. Third, if we want green collar jobs, we must support policies designed to improve environmental restoration, quality, and justice.

Endnote

1 I do not include purely administrative white-collar jobs in my definition. Using this admittedly restrictive and narrow definition, there are still a wide range of green job employment opportunities in the San Francisco Bay Area economy.

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