



What we learned from the first Green New Deal

By David Foster

In evaluating the latest call for a Green New Deal, Americans would do well to heed the lessons of 2008 when the idea was first introduced. Unless the transition to a clean energy economy is based on unifying politics, this next iteration will also prove another adventure in pyrrhic rhetoric.

As founding executive director of the BlueGreen Alliance which brought together many of America's labor unions and environmental organizations and an architect of the first call for a Green New Deal in 2008, I believe that experience is important for Congress to review to avoid further polarizing mistakes.

The original global call for a Green New Deal was [delivered by Achim Steiner](#), head of the United Nations Environment Program, in response to the Great Recession. Steiner's call for massive investments in clean energy was equally a solution to skyrocketing unemployment as to the growing threat of climate change. Without the unemployment crisis there would have been no basis for calling for a Green New Deal.

Second, the Great Recession was preceded by a dramatic three-year rise in oil prices that climbed to over \$145 a barrel by May 2008. This rise contributed to a global crisis in agriculture, highly dependent on oil for fuel and fertilizer. The accompanying food riots were well documented from Egypt to Indonesia. Oil, a foundational commodity

for global society, was believed to be in permanent decline. These factors were key elements in why a Green New Deal made sense.

Finally, it is important to note that the linkage of economic crises with environmental challenges had a specific history in the U.S. dating back to the WTO protests of 1999. At that time, a predecessor organization to the BlueGreen Alliance, the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, introduced the first common agenda for workers and conservationists on the streets of Seattle. Founded by legendary environmental activist David Brower and myself, ASJE called for enforceable labor and environmental standards in all trade agreements as a foundational principle for strengthening unions, raising living standards, and improving environmental regulations worldwide.

In early 2009, Steiner came to Washington, D.C. to call for all governments to invest 25 percent of their stimulus dollars in the green economy to solve the Great Recession and address climate change. In March of that year, I joined him in Nairobi for the biennial [UNEP conference](#) to repeat that call. Unfortunately, few countries responded at the level that both challenges demanded. The United States made, perhaps, the largest investment of any country, nearly \$100 billion in clean energy, creating one million jobs.



More common was the refrain I heard at subsequent conferences in Europe, “Better a brown recovery, than a green recession.” Job strategies based on green investments were seen as destructive to existing employment, while insufficient to produce alternative employment. What has changed today?

First, we are no longer in the middle of a recession. While unemployment is low, inequality in America is the worst in 50 years, defined by both race and zip code. Oil prices are also low and supplies are abundant. That’s bad for the climate, but good for workers whose lives are dependent on individual transportation. Global supply chains are even more integrated today, transforming most forms of labor into a global commodity with precarious results for working class people. A [recent survey](#) prepared by the International Trade Union Confederation in 16 countries covering 53 percent of the world’s population found that 40 percent of families had experienced unemployment in the last two years. This experience has led to a collapse in confidence in government, not just in America, but everywhere.

Under these circumstances does the call for 100 percent renewable energy in the United States make sense as a unifying platform for empowering working people, giving them a stronger voice in American democracy, and providing them with stable employment in a global economy?

Unfortunately, to America’s 75,000 nuclear power plant workers, who produce 20 percent of the country’s electricity, all of it carbon-free, this sounds more like a declaration of war. And to the country’s 600,000 employees in the natural gas industry whose growth in the last decade, displacing coal as the primary fuel for electricity, is the single largest reason that US

carbon emissions have dropped during most of the past decade, it sounds like an assault on their living standards.

Instead of a Green New Deal based on short-term, crisis intervention to disrupt the economy, Congress would do better focusing on three long-term issues which, together, could guide America’s economy toward a low carbon future.

Those three policies are:

- putting a price on carbon
- enacting a long-term, technology-neutral clean energy standard
- linking the carbon price and clean energy standard to border adjustments that protect American workers and their employers, from carbon polluters

The economy, as a whole, needs to price carbon to provide a clear signal that, over the next 30 years we will move to clean energy in the most cost-effective way possible. It must include all fuels and generation types. How we price carbon is less important than how we use the revenues. These must fund the transition for impacted communities, ensure broader equity, and support new technology, particularly in the industrial sector.

A clean energy standard would put all technologies on an equal footing, provide a basis for stabilizing our largest current source of zero emissions’ electricity — nuclear, and reward the partial contributions of cleaner sources of generation. This transition will take 30 years; those who work in these industries need to know that the investment of their careers to produce America’s energy will be dealt with in a thoughtful manner.



However, neither of these policies will achieve acceptance from working people, if they are not linked to a clear declaration that America will protect their labor standards, wages, and employers when they embrace the cleanest energy requirements in the world.

Without utilizing our trade agreements as a powerful tool for protecting our commitments to labor, the environment, and our businesses, just as the Yellow Vest movement turned on President Macron's gas tax, America's working people will see another Green New Deal as simply another choice between a "brown kleptocracy", and a "green aristocracy." America's Congress, its business, labor, environmental, and equal rights' communities can do so much better.

David Foster served as senior advisor to U.S. Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz from 2014-2017 on energy, climate and economic development issues. Prior to working at the Department of Energy, he served as the founding Executive Director of the BlueGreen Alliance (BGA), a strategic partnership of 14 of America's most important unions and environmental organizations with a combined membership of 14.5 million. From 1990 to 2006, he was the director of United Steelworkers, District No. 11, a 13-state region based in Minneapolis.

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