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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Green-Collar Solution

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Van Jones is a rare bird. He's a black social activist in Oakland, Calif., and as green an environmentalist as they come. He really gets passionate, and funny, when he talks about what it's like to be black and green:

“Try this experiment. Go knock on someone's door in West Oakland, Watts or Newark and say: ‘We gotta really big problem!’ They say: ‘We do? We do?’ ‘Yeah, we gotta really big problem!’ ‘We do? We do?’ ‘Yeah, we gotta save the polar bears! You may not make it out of this neighborhood alive, but we gotta save the polar bears!’ ”

Mr. Jones then just shakes his head. You try that approach on people without jobs who live in neighborhoods where they've got a lot better chance of getting killed by a passing shooter than a melting glacier, you're going to get nowhere — and without bringing America's underclass into the green movement, it's going to get nowhere, too.

“We need a different on-ramp” for people from disadvantaged communities, says Mr. Jones. “The leaders of the climate establishment came in through one door and now they want to squeeze everyone through that same door. It's not going to work. If we want to have a broad-based environmental movement, we need more entry points.”

Mr. Jones, who heads the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, which helps kids avoid jail and secure jobs, has an idea how to change that — a “green-collar” jobs program that focuses on underprivileged youth. I would not underestimate him. Mr. Jones, age 39 and a Yale Law School grad, exudes enough energy to light a few buildings on his own.

One thing spurring him in this project, he explained, was the way that the big oil companies bought ads in black-owned newspapers in California in 2006 showing an African-American woman filling her gas tank with a horrified look at the pump price. The ads were used to help bring out black votes to defeat

Proposition 87. That ballot initiative proposed a tax on oil companies drilling in California, the money from which would have gone to develop alternative energy projects. The oil companies tried to scare African-Americans into thinking that the tax on the companies would be passed on at the pump.

“The polluters were able to stampede poor people into their camp,” said Mr. Jones. “I never want to see an N.A.A.C.P. leader on the wrong side of an environment issue again.”

Using his little center in Oakland, Mr. Jones has been on a crusade to help underprivileged African-Americans and other disadvantaged communities understand why they would be the biggest beneficiaries of a greener America. It’s about jobs. The more government requires buildings to be more energy efficient, the more work there will be retrofitting buildings all across America with solar panels, insulation and other weatherizing materials. Those are manual-labor jobs that can’t be outsourced.

“You can’t take a building you want to weatherize, put it on a ship to China and then have them do it and send it back,” said Mr. Jones. “So we are going to have to put people to work in this country — weatherizing millions of buildings, putting up solar panels, constructing wind farms. Those green-collar jobs can provide a pathway out of poverty for someone who has not gone to college.”

Let’s tell our disaffected youth: “You can make more money if you put down that handgun and pick up a caulk gun.”

Remember, adds Mr. Jones, “a big chunk of the African-American community is economically stranded. The blue-collar, stepping-stone, manufacturing jobs are leaving. And they’re not being replaced by anything. So you have this whole generation of young blacks who are basically in economic free fall.” Green-collar retrofitting jobs are a great way to catch them.

To this end, Mr. Jones’s group and the electrical union in Oakland created the Oakland Apollo Alliance. This year that coalition helped to raise \$250,000 from the city government to create a union-supported training program that will teach young people in Oakland how to put up solar panels and weatherize buildings.

It is the beginning of a “Green for All” campaign (greenforall.org) that Mr. Jones — backed by other environmental activists like Majora Carter from Sustainable South Bronx — is launching to get Congress to allocate \$125 million to train 30,000 young people a year in green trades.

“If we can get these youth in on the ground floor of the solar industry now, where they can be installers today, they’ll become managers in five years and owners in 10. And then they become inventors,” said Mr. Jones. “The green economy has the power to deliver new sources of work, wealth and health to low-income people — while honoring the Earth. If you can do that, you just wiped out a whole bunch of problems. We can make what is good for poor black kids good for the polar bears and good for the country.”