

BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required Lions to Lambs: Trade Unions, Environmentalists, and MNCs Collaborate to Tackle Problems

Breakout Session Summary

Thursday, November 6, 2008 | 10-11:30 a.m.

Speakers

- **David Foster**, Executive Director, Business and Society Program, Blue Green Alliance
- **Michael Peck**, Founder, MAPA Group
- **Nikki Daruwala**, Director, Socially Responsible Business Program, American Rights at Work (moderator)

Highlights

- Although the United States invented wind and solar energy, it was slow to act, and now Americans are buying renewable energy back from Europe.
- In order for renewable energy to advance, environmentalists need to work with labor unions, which will likely be involved in the manufacture of essential materials like wind turbine blades.

Memorable Quotes

- “What are green jobs? Blue collar jobs with a green purpose.” —David Foster, Blue Green Alliance
- “The art of the deal [between unions and companies] is how you work it out, and we are working it out.” —Michael Peck, MAPA Group
- “[Trade unions and NGOs] have shown exemplary ways of how working together can solve problems and relieve tensions. The result is many successful collaborations.” —Nikki Daruwala, American Rights at Work

Overview

Previously considered more adversarial than collaborative, trade unions and environmental organizations are increasingly coming together to work on a range of issues—and this collaboration is paying off with good jobs, a clean environment, and a safer world.

The Blue Green Alliance is a strategic partnership between labor unions and environmental organizations working to expand the job-creating potential of the green economy and to improve the rights of working people at home and abroad. In particular, the organization works on global warming, workers rights, trade reform, and “green chemistry” (getting toxics out of the workplace and community) through environmental investment, sustainable initiatives, and proactive dialogue.

Peck pointed out that green jobs are actually blue collar jobs with a green purpose. In effect, it’s not about particular job skills but the purpose of what they are making and how it is made. There’s a focus on the integrity of the manufacturing, the job site, and how the workers are being treated.

Peck also dispelled the myth that environmental regulations cost jobs. He suggested we invest in a “Green Deal”—a New Deal-style program that would reward work done close to home and support international labor and environmental standards. He also advised putting a price on carbon and conducting a life-cycle evaluation of chemicals that need to pass a series of global regulations.

One example of a socially responsible green economy organization is Gamesa, which works with communities worldwide to build wind farms that are compatible with the surrounding natural environment. Because Gamesa has a core belief that if you take care of your workers, they will return the same loyalty, the company decided to create an alliance with steelworkers. While Peck emphasized the importance of open communication, he said no relationship is perfect, citing ongoing struggles, misunderstandings, and disagreements. He advised focusing on the “art of the deal” to find that midpoint where you are profitable and green.

Foster added that the relationship between companies and trade unions has become more than an economic or transactional relationship; it’s about both parties trying to succeed in this new type of economy. Consequently, it’s much more likely that we’ll create new institutional and regulatory schemes that mutually benefit the unions and the companies.

During the Q&A, someone from Brazil asked about the training challenge for green jobs, and the roles of the private sector and NGOs. Peck said training is one of the most important aspects of green jobs and suggested community colleges could fill this role. He added that because manufacturing jobs have been shipped overseas, there’s an even greater need for flexible training programs.

* * *

This summary is also available on www.bsr.org/bsrconferences/2008/session-summaries.cfm.