

Green Jobs Platform for Solar Energy

By Sheila Davis

When you see a solar panel installer on a roof you probably think, “green job.” After all, the solar panel will help reduce climate change impacts and provide a renewable source of energy. You assume that the worker is receiving a living wage and health benefits and has an opportunity for advancement.

The job looks safe and the product looks green. But what if the worker in China, India, or Mexico who made the solar panel was exposed to toxic chemicals, could not afford healthcare, and was denied a living wage and basic labor rights?

As of now, there is no definition for a “green job” that includes consideration for the environmental justice and health impacts on workers, or for the communities where solar products are made or recycled. And without consideration of these issues, the “green job” concept, which has been an important vision for a change from “business as usual,” risks becoming a form of “green wash.”

In the Footsteps of Silicon Giants

The solar industry’s production processes and materials are taken directly from the computer and semiconductor industry. The silicon-based solar panels require the same processes as microchips, and many of the thin film solar manufacturers use equipment and processes similar to those used in making flat panel televisions.

Unfortunately, despite its image as a “clean” technology, the computer industry has never been “green.” Santa Clara County—the birthplace of the personal computer, located in the heart of Silicon Valley—has had significant experience with the environmental impacts of the microchip industry brought on by the industry’s lack of environmental planning and oversight. Widespread toxic chemical pollution has caused injury and death in local communities and around the world. Now brand name electronic

companies like Sanyo, Sharp, Samsung, and IBM—not exactly known for their “green” practices—are making solar panels.

Santa Clara County also has two large Superfund sites resulting from chemical spills and toxic leaks from computer manufacturing facilities in the 1980s that are still being cleaned up. In 1982, more than 60,000 gallons of Trichloroethane (TCE)—known to cause birth defects, cancer, and death—contaminated the drinking water of bordering communities.

Most of the electronics manufacturers—including IBM and Hewlett Packard—have since left Silicon Valley and moved their production facilities to locations in China, Malaysia, Mexico, and India where labor is cheaper, environmental regulations poorly enforced, and workers’ rights not fully protected. The manufacturers rarely share information about their component parts suppliers or the locations of their facilities and the working conditions there, deeming such information to be proprietary. Needless to say, green jobs and clean technology are not part of the industry’s legacy. Now, as the solar industry scales up to meet the demand for renewable energy, it must address these issues immediately, or risk repeating the mistakes of the microelectronics industry.

If It’s Not Just, It’s Not Green

The nascent solar industry has a unique opportunity to incorporate the principles of social and environmental justice into its supply, production, and recycling operations around the world by proactively creating and implementing systems to (a) monitor

chemical use and exposure at its sites, (b) care for worker health and safety, and (c) enforce labor and environmental laws.

With this belief in hand, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (SVTC), which advocates for environmen-

tal and social justice in the high tech industry, has launched a campaign to get solar companies to make an early commitment to reducing toxic chemical exposures, developing programs to responsibly recycle their panels, and adopting a “green jobs” platform. ■

The Green Jobs Platform for Solar

- (1) Workers’ activity and output must contribute to improving the quality of the environment.
- (2) Workers must earn a living wage that supports their health and well-being, as well as that of their families.
- (3) Workers and their families must receive adequate health benefits at an affordable cost.
- (4) Workers must have opportunities for advancement in their jobs and, wherever possible, share in the wealth of the company.
- (5) Workers’ right to form and join unions must be protected, as also whistleblower and organizing rights.
- (6) Workers must not be discriminated against based on race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.
- (7) Workers should be protected against exposure to toxics as much as possible. This may be achieved by (a) phasing out chemicals known to be hazardous to human health and the environment; (b) engineering controls to keep exposure levels as low as possible while striving for safer alternatives; (c) treating the use of protective equipment as a temporary measure; and (d) using the principles of “green” chemistry to develop new products and manufacturing processes.
- (8) Workers should be fully informed—in the appropriate languages—of the hazards associated with their job and given useful information on dealing with injuries and illnesses caused by exposure to the relevant toxic materials.
- (9) The company should strive to be a good corporate citizen and invest in the community in which it is located. It should hire locally, pay its fair share of taxes, and contribute to the community’s social and physical infrastructure development, including schools, transit systems, housing, roads, and most importantly, waste and recycling systems.
- (10) The company should not only abide by existing environmental, labor, and health and safety laws of the country in which it is located, it should proactively support sustainability and environmental health standards.
- (11) The company should not lobby against “green job” principles and if they do, they should disclose any such efforts.
- (12) Environmental health and safety standards should be applied uniformly throughout the company’s global supply chain and at every stage of the product’s lifecycle.
- (13) The environmental burden created by the product, including its disposal, should not disproportionately impact poor communities, people of color, women and children, or developing nations.



Photo:
Solar installers at work.

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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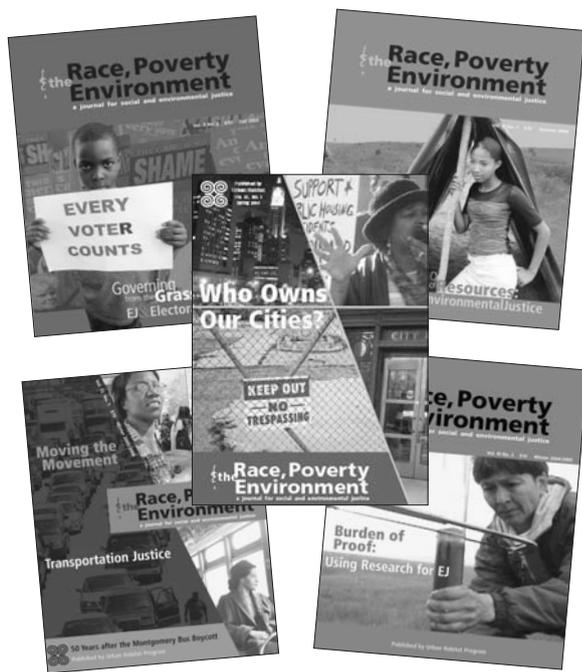
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