

Saving The Environment Without Killing Jobs

Kevin Begos, AP

The nation's largest labor unions are ready and willing to help fight global warming, but are cautioning environmentalists that workers need new clean-energy jobs before existing industries are shut down. The four-day Power Shift conference in Pittsburgh discusses putting a stop to coal mining, fracking for oil and gas, and nuclear power, but organizers also want workers to join the battle against climate change. Union leaders say their workers want to help build a new, green economy.

"Global warming is here, and we can work and get it fixed together," United Steel Workers president Leo Gerard said in a Friday night address at Power Shift. But other labor groups note that while they share the same long-term clean energy goals with environmentalists, there are challenges. "It's not just as simple as 'No Fracking' or other bans," said Tahir Duckett, an AFL/CIO representative who spoke at a Saturday Power Shift panel that sought to promote dialogue between environmentalists and workers.

Duckett said workers need new jobs to make a transition to clean energy, noting that shutting down industries such as coal "can turn entire communities into a ghost town. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend like people aren't fighting for their very survival." Richard Fowler, a Power Shift moderator, said that instead of talking about a "ban" on a particular industry, environmentalists should talk about solutions that provide jobs. "That's what is missing," said Fowler, a radio host and member of Generational Alliance, a Washington, D.C. based coalition of community youth groups. "It's always a ban, or a fix, or a cap, or a trade instead of just straight-up campaigns to build cleaner energy sources like wind and solar."

The organizers of Power Shift say a green economy is the only way to head off catastrophic global warming and build a healthier future for everyone, including workers and their families. Pittsburgh was chosen for the biannual conference partly because it's at the crossroads of old and new energy. The city itself has banned fracking, yet the surrounding county recently signed a huge drilling lease for land under the Pittsburgh International Airport. Western Pennsylvania is also the birthplace of the oil and steel industries, but tech firms are attracted by students from Carnegie Mellon University and other schools.

Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune said their goal is to simultaneously decrease pollution from existing fossil fuels and increase clean energy, while taking care of workers in the process. "We have to begin replacing old, outdated, dirty fossil fuel projects with energy efficiency and clean energy," Brune said. "We're talking about a massive transition, with millions of people who will be affected."

The Power Shift conference is organized every two years by the Washington, D.C.-based Energy Action Coalition, with support this year from groups including the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, 350.org, and the Rockefeller

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Brothers Fund. But it's not clear how much some of the members of Power Shift are willing to compromise with workers as far as the timing of shutting down polluting industries. On Saturday many Power Shift sponsors, such as 350.org, also held a "Global Frackdown" with protests that sought to "Ban Fracking Now." Some young people attending Power Shift say they're sensitive to the needs of workers.

"To change to a green economy we need all hands on deck, and that includes the coal workers," said Seth Bush, a 23-year-old graduate of the University of Pittsburgh who now works for the Sierra Club. "And part of the conversation involves making sure that those people can put food on the table."

Rich Fitzgerald, the Allegheny County Executive, said Pittsburgh's history has some important lessons for Power Shift: the convention center they're meeting in is named after David L. Lawrence, a former Pittsburgh mayor who worked with industry to help create some of the nation's first major air pollution laws in the 1940s. Back at the Power Shift conference, Duckett noted the potential for environmentalists and labor to join forces, but said it won't be easy. "That's a roomful of people sympathetic to workers, but they don't understand us. They don't see the world through that lens of a working family," Duckett said.

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