

Green Jobs and a Just Transition for Workers and Communities



“The job of the conversion movement, therefore—workers, unions and allies in peace and civil rights and community organizations—is to mount a political struggle that will advance government action on conversion,”

Lance Compa, on the 1980s Military Economic Conversion Movement

The Military is the Only Major Federal Jobs Program in the U.S.

Understanding that climate disruption is an outcome of our broken economic system, climate threats cannot be separated from other forms of insecurity that people experience in their daily lives. Vast economic insecurity and inequality are outcomes of the financially extractive, fossil-fueled economy.

The U.S. military has long capitalized on economic precarity, [recruiting poor people](#) who lack other options and middle-class populations faced with significant debt and instability. As a matter of practicality, the prevalence of militarized jobs in communities remains a key political blockade to reducing military funding. As such, solutions to the climate crisis must also address the absence of an adequate number of well-paying jobs, poverty, inequality, and other prevalent socioeconomic concerns of our time. At the same time, we must convert a major share of U.S. manufacturing and engineering from building weapons of war to building a 100% clean energy economy by 2030.

While official estimates are known to be too low, the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) counted about six million people as unemployed and actively seeking work in 2019—a figure now rendered obsolete by the coronavirus crisis, but indicative of our economy under “good” circumstances.⁹⁶ This figure does not include all working age people who are unemployed and more comprehensive methods of calculating unemployment often double the standard unemployment rate.

Even in the best of times, unemployment rates also vary drastically by geography, race, and age; rural workers, Black workers, Latinx workers, and young people all have higher than average rates of unemployment. In normal times, forty percent of the U.S. workforce is [employed in insecure positions](#), such as temporary, part-time, and “on-call” workers, contractors, and the self-employed.⁹⁷ While employment statistics can help illustrate the economic crisis, they can also minimize the lived-realities for the tens of millions of people living in poverty in the United States. In the richest country in the world, even prior to the coronavirus pandemic and its associated economic implosion, there were 140 million poor and low-wealth people. That’s over 43% of the population of the United States. Low pay, job scarcity or inaccessibility, and attacks on unionization work together to keep people in poverty.

Do We Have a Poverty Draft in the United States?

Mandatory military service ended in 1973, and by the 1980s the term “poverty draft” gained prominence as [a term used to describe](#) “the belief that the enlisted ranks of the military were made up of young people with limited economic opportunities.”⁹⁸ In the context of vast economic precarity in the United States, military service often functions as a “draft-like system” that attracts low-income and other marginalized groups into enlisting because of a lack of other job, income, and educational opportunities available in their communities. [Half of all young people who join the military](#) do so as a means to pay for future education.⁹⁹ Military recruiters have historically recruited among middle and lower classes. [Reporting by the Seattle Times](#) in 2005 found, for example, that nearly half of new recruits came “from lower-middle-class to poor households.”¹⁰⁰ Native Americans, who have the [highest poverty rate](#) of any racial or ethnic group in the United States, also serve in the country’s armed forces at the highest rate of any ethnic group in the country.¹⁰¹

Despite such vast economic insecurity, the military is the only major federal jobs program in the United States. [Over 1,300,000 Americans](#) are on active military duty and over 800,000 more are in the military reserves. Another 1,600,000 Americans work for companies contracted by the U.S. military not only to supply weapons of war, but also the goods and services that support military operations.¹⁰² The Department of Defense [calls itself](#) America’s largest employer - larger than Walmart, even.¹⁰³ Since the military industrial complex is spread across the United States, some members of congress justify military spending by the jobs it provides their states or districts. War spending is often perceived as an effective way to increase employment, but there are far better ways besides a massive military jobs program to employ Americans.

Funding Green Jobs and the Care Economy Yields Net Benefits

In fact, compared to alternative uses for those funds, military spending is one of the least effective sources of job creation. According to [Brown University’s Cost of War Project](#), a total of 6.9 jobs are created per \$1 million of federal military spending. By comparison,

spending the same amount in wind creates 8.4 good-paying jobs and in solar 9.5. For the same level of spending, clean energy and infrastructure create over 40% more jobs. Investing the same amount in energy efficiency retrofits creates nearly twice the level of job creation by military spending.¹⁰⁴

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Across the board, funding the green economy instead of a bloated military budget would be a net job creator.

Shifting excess military spending to green manufacturing in particular creates opportunities for targeted job creation in regions of the United States that have been hardest hit by declines in manufacturing over the last two decades. [If we shift \\$125 billion](#) from military spending to green manufacturing, an additional 250,000 jobs would be created.¹⁰⁵ In

order to rapidly transition to a green economy, we must fund millions of jobs to dramatically scale-up clean energy production and transition to one hundred percent renewable energy, overhaul the U.S. transportation systems to build and run mass public transportation, and prepare communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis to adapt to the realities of a warming planet.

Then there's the care economy. The lowest carbon jobs are those that don't extract anything from the land or create waste and have a limited environmental impact. Jobs that include teaching, nurturing, and caring, often referred to as care work, are invaluable to our society and to the economy at large. The [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#) describes care work as, "the work that makes all other work possible." Direct public investment in these jobs also has a greater impact on the economy than military spending. Compared to the 6.9 jobs created in the military, \$1 million dollars in education produces an average of 15.2 good-paying jobs.¹⁰⁶ A dramatic expansion of these jobs, and ensuring that the standards and conditions of this work are raised, is a critical component of the transition away from extractive, destructive, and often violent work and towards an economy of care.

Endeavoring to address the climate crisis and economic inequality simultaneously, a federal jobs guarantee is a key component of the Green New Deal. A federal jobs guarantee promises a job—at a living wage and with full benefits—to anyone who wants one. A public job guarantee isn't a new concept, in fact it was a key demand of the Civil Rights Movement. In the Forward to the 1966 publication A "[Freedom Budget](#)" for All Americans, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. states, "We shall eliminate unemployment for Negroes when we demand full and fair employment for all." The first of the seven demands outlined in the Freedom Budget was "To provide full employment for all who are willing and able to work, including those who need education or training to make them willing and able."¹⁰⁷ Direct public investment in a program that competes for labor with competitive wages and good benefits isn't unheard of in the United States. A jobs guarantee could look a lot like the military does currently, an expense we deem necessary that serves

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the public good. While providing alternatives to low-paid work in carbon-intensive supply chains, a federal jobs guarantee could offer better-paying jobs that improve communities while supporting a Just Transition to a green economy.

We Need a Just Transition for Workers and Communities

The fossil fuel and military sectors mirror each other in the way that workers frequently end up funneled into lethal work due to limited options.

Communities across the United States depend on employment in the military and various sectors of the military industrial complex. Like the workers who extract, process, transport and use fossil fuels will need to transition into new jobs, there must be alternative pathways to good employment for individuals and communities whose livelihoods are tied to the military. The leadership of labor unions, which have long organized to advance the interests of low-income workers, is critical to [advancing a worker-led](#) Just Transition movement. When the peace and climate justice movements stand in solidarity with organized labor, the possibility of a powerful, coordinated, and truly transformative movement emerges.

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The Green New Deal has been described as an “all hands on deck” kind of policy. If we do it right, the Green New Deal will be a mass mobilization that would radically restructure the fossil-fueled economy as we know it. This kind of comprehensive program will require a wide range of jobs not only in manufacturing and the energy sector, but across the economy. For those who will lose work in the fossil fuel industry or military industrial complex, a job guarantee provides an employment safety net during economic transition.

A job guarantee is one measure among many that can be taken to phase out extractive industries with care and prevent adverse and unjust outcomes for workers and communities relying on those industry jobs. Such outcomes can be prevented if we plan and invest federal resources accordingly. [As articulated](#) by the climate justice movement, “Just Transition to

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us represents a set of aligned strategies to transition whole communities toward thriving economies that provide dignified, productive and ecologically sustainable livelihoods that are governed directly by workers and communities.”¹⁰⁸

Resembling the calls for a Just Transition from the climate justice movement in the last decade, the economic conversion movement led by anti-war activists in the 1980s sought to plan and implement a

transformation from a war economy to a peace economy. Recognizing that every recession during the Cold War was met with an increase in military spending, [many in the peace movement concluded](#) that in order to end the arms race, it must be separated from jobs and economic prosperity.¹⁰⁹ As labor law professor [Lance Compra articulated](#) in a paper on the topic in 1985, “Conversion planning to move from military to non-military production can tear down the barrier—fear of job loss—that blocks broad rank-and-file support for disarmament initiatives and a non-interventionist policy.”¹¹⁰

Much like contemporary conversations around economic transition, the 1980s economic conversion movement called for national policy dedicated to retraining and re-employing affected workers. Calling for significant military spending cuts, the movement sought to redirect tax revenues away from the military in order to spend the money on social programs, education, public transportation, health care, housing, and other socially beneficial industries. The effort linked Peace movement activists with labor unions, launching a Jobs with Peace Campaign with referendums in 85 cities around the United States. This cross-movement collaboration for planned-economic-conversation helped lay the groundwork for the contemporary conceptions of a Just Transition. It's past time we realize the vision put forth by movements for decades to redefine industries and transition whole communities and whole economies.

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