

GREEN JOBS

THE GREEN ECONOMY

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- ◇ environmental justice ◇
- ◇ economic justice ◇
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an interview with
Ben Powless

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*Greg Macdougall:* I'm here interviewing **Ben Powless**, a Mohawk youth living in Ottawa currently involved in a number of different projects, who just got back from the Green For All Academy which was held in Oakland. Green For All ([www.greenforall.org](http://www.greenforall.org)) is an organization founded by Van Jones, who is now a special advisor on green jobs for the Obama administration; Van Jones is also author of the book 'The Green Collar Economy'. Ben, can you describe what the Green For All Academy was about?

*Ben Powless:* Yeah, well essentially you picked it up, it was led for a while by Van Jones, not directly founded necessarily by him, but through a coalition of different organizations, mostly that came out of the Bay area, that formed around this idea that looking at green jobs as an opportunity to address a number of different problems at the same time, and primarily the focus around green jobs is to try and imagine a society and an economy, a way of life that is environmentally sustainable: to try and imagine the actual jobs and the transition that we would have to go through to get towards this society. And in recognition of that, it also tries to address at the same time the fundamental social inequalities in our societies, especially tackling issues of poverty, issues of poor and low-income communities, marginalized communities, frequently not having access to most aspects of the environmental movement and not having access to a clean, healthy, safe environment – forms of environmental justice, really. And so, starting with this idea that - there's almost a human rights basis to it - that people of colour, people from poor communities, have just as much a right, in many cases even more of a right where their communities have been marginalized in the past, to participate in this new economy. The Green For All and their initiatives and their coalitions focus on generating support, generating policies, and then actually involving and bringing together networks of people that can be involved in actual training programs to train: primarily they focus on young people, and in the U.S. especially there's a focus on people who've been convicted and are returning from prison sentences, to take up a lot of these positions that are designated as part of the green

do is try and address the social inequalities that we have in our societies at the same time as we really, radically try and restructure our economy into one that will be sustainable over future generations, one that has the chance to stop dangerous climate change from happening on our planet. I think that if we really try and grasp what that means, what it means to really transition away from a fossil fuel based economy, to transition away from one that cuts down trees, that wastes so many resources, then I think, call it what you want, green jobs / green economy is the only thing that's left possible. And I think if you really try and grasp that then it's a humongous idea, and it's something that we really need to take to heart and really need to be able to step up to.

*GM:* And it's quite an opportunity. We're being pushed in that way, but we can take advantage of it and make things better.

*BP:* Well yeah, that's what it is at the same time. And that's what everybody's saying, is that this is the opportunity of a lifetime: to get it right, to get the economy and society and form of government – as needs to be fundamentally part of that, that's part of Elizabeth May's new book as well, I'm talking about the basic democratic principles, it's just elementary that we need a well functioning democracy, which we've seen little evidence of here in Canada, to make sure that the society and country can respond to the actual concerns and to the actual needs of citizens, it's just a fundamental part of democracy. But we really only have this one chance I think to get it right, and that's why we really need to have everybody taking part in this, everybody become, identify as a stakeholder in talking about economic solutions, but talking about environmental solutions because that's really what's going to shape the history of our Mother Earth for the next number of generations, is how we choose to respond to these crises today.

BP: Well, the idea out of the U.S. was that this whole green jobs program would be part of an economic stimulus thing, and I think in Canada a lot of commentators have started to say that we need to be really thinking about an economic stimulus package in Canada as we start to see a lot of our key industries starting to falter and unemployment rates are going up: people everywhere I know are having a hard time finding a job. So it's a real concern and I think similarly here in Canada we need that kind of government stimulus, that industries, businesses, even small stores that are closing down, they're not able to provide jobs, so we can't be looking for them to step out of this crisis and generate consumption that would bring us out of this cycle. So with that idea, with that understanding that we might need an actual stimulus package that would be able to address this, once that money is there, that can be invested in our communities, that can be invested in training programs, that can be invested in education, as well as re-training programs for people that are moving out of jobs and economies and industries that will have to close down as a result of moving towards a just transition away from a fossil fuel based economy – people in those kind of positions will need to be re-trained – and the basic idea there is to make sure that as a fundamental part of green ... when we mention green jobs, you also need to think about this as sustainable, well paying, decent employing jobs, as well as jobs and especially training opportunities that are focused on poorer communities and immigrant communities and our First Nations communities, and young people in particular, and so that part really needs to be enforced, really stressed, made accountable to a green jobs movement, to make sure that it does contain the elements of social justice and it does have a chance of attaining some forms of economic justice. Because if not we're going to end up with what Van Jones points out in his book, this is a sort of type of 'eco-apartheid' where 90 per cent of the population is running their air conditioning because it's too hot and they have old cars because they can't afford anything else, that are polluting the environment more than anything, when it's only 10 per cent of the population that's able to afford environmentally friendly alternatives, and that kind of solution is never going to work. So you can approach it from that angle of saying this is the only pragmatic thing we can do, or really just see it as the only moral, the only responsible thing we can

economy. And they're positions from all aspects of the economy, from typical what's called 'blue collar' work right up to 'white collar' work, from research to actual design to manufacturing, as well as things like to simply going into houses and fixing them up, construction, manufacturing processes as well. So it really focuses on trying to envision what are all the very much fundamental aspects of our society that we really need to make different: from our energy sources, from our food sources, to the way we build things and the way we consume things and eventually have to recycle them. That's sort of the idea of the green economy: it has to be all of these things, and at the same time we have to make sure that this economy doesn't recreate the injustices and the inequalities of our past grey economy.

GM: When you're talking about that, that's socioeconomic disparity and ...

BP: It's economic justice, yeah.

GM: So environmental justice, economic justice and social justice all tied together. And I guess it's looking at the green economy beyond just consumer choices, but actually the other side of that is employment, and that has to equitably divided or participated in.

BP: It has to be equitable and the other thing is it has to be local. That's the other thing about a lot of the way this idea is set up, is that remodelling a house, doing energy audits, installing renewable energy systems, doing local community agriculture, community gardens – these are all fundamentally local processes, and it can be replicated on a wide scale in most urban and even semi-urban centres across North America, and in a lot of other places; a lot of other places they already exist in terms of agricultural systems and local markets, but these are things that I think we really have as a basic precept for a new society, a new economy. And these are the kind of things that also can't be outsourced really, and it also provides secure employment for people in those kind of positions as long as we're able to sustain them.

*GM:* And you were talking about some training and the ability to give training. What kind of things did you learn at this Academy and what are you taking forward from it.

*BP:* Well the Academy itself wasn't as much a training session in the sense of teaching us how to do any of these positions as it was a session about how to communicate and how to organize around the ideas of green jobs and a green economy. And so the Academy, the three days that we were there participating in workshops, a lot of them were focused around communication skills, about actually being able to go back and being able to present to people, to communities, to town halls, to city councils, to whoever might be the appropriate audience, and really communicate this idea which is really just starting to pick up off the ground, people are just starting to hear about this idea of green jobs and really get excited about it. And so the idea is with this Academy, to be able to train all these people to go back and organize around it but make sure that they're representatives of the communities themselves, because the idea of the green economy is being picked up, but it's being picked up by a lot of governments, it's being picked up by big environmental NGOs, sometimes it's unions as well, and sometimes businesses. And so there's a real threat there, that if we don't have a solid base, a solid grassroots base, if we don't have a solid community-centred accountability behind the green jobs movement it could very much become a greenwashed movement that just says all these industries are going to be all of a sudden green employment, green jobs, and they're going to escape the scrutiny just because they get some sort of label, that's the typical greenwash anything goes. And so the idea is to really make sure these kind of things come from the community, and they're actually able to represent this different paradigm, this economic justice / social justice / environmental justice framework, which some of the green jobs discourse that's coming out, especially from governments and corporations and even environmental NGOs, doesn't really take into account, they just sort of say we're going to pump in \$120 million into this, and it's going to create some green jobs. Well they don't say how many, they don't say who it's going to go to, they don't talk about how people are actually going to get employment and training from local communities, and how those jobs are going to be sustainable

highlight this as a major priority coming into this year, coming into the end of last year. And we started setting up our own working groups and that, and really not seeing a lot of movement on the ground around green jobs, I mean you can find a few policy documents by some environmental groups, you can find some stuff on their website, but nobody's out there in the streets talking about it. And so we've had a few initial engagements around the green jobs issue but our first real big event we're going to try to pull off this October and it's going to be here in Ottawa, probably an event about maybe three or four days, we're going to try and bring in hundreds of young people from across the country to a conference with the main focus being around green jobs and generating a political movement here in Canada, that people are able to go back to their communities and represent this idea and as well are able to go back, hopefully take some of the tools, take some of the strategies from the conference and help organize and help facilitate this within their own communities, and as well set up coalitions with other organizations, other partners, to really press for green jobs / the green economy. It's not going to be the only focus of our conference, another significant portion is going to be focused around Canada and its international obligations around climate change: of course this year is the most important year in perhaps the upcoming generation in terms of the United Nations climate change negotiations where they're actually determining medium and long term targets on greenhouse gas reductions and so we also need to make sure that a strong message and a strong part of talking about green jobs is saying that as part of Canada's reduction strategy, as part of Canada's commitments and obligations, moral duty to the rest of the world and to Canadian society itself, as Canada is going to be one of the most impacted countries especially in Indigenous communities, Canada really needs to be investing in green jobs and green industries, really trying to really transform the basis of its old, grey, dying economy, and it's fundamentally going to be the young people in our generation that are going to have to be the ones that are leading this, the ones that are going to take this into the future.

*GM:* How does green jobs address socioeconomic problems? How does green jobs address the current economic crisis?

Nations communities is the recognition of First Nations sovereignty over the land, and that allows for First Nations communities to perhaps even leapfrog over other communities that have to take time and get approval and get zoning permits and sort of change around their industries and everything. A lot of First Nations communities are dependent on outside sources for power, for example, but with these ideas in their green economy, a lot of them could become a lot more sustainable and eventually even sovereign in their energy production, as well as a huge consideration that's part of that is making a lot of our communities more self-sustainable providing their own food. I think it's a bigger worry in some places here in southern Canada where those kind of traditions have been lost. For example our people are actually in tradition agricultural but few of our communities are left able to farm anymore; in some cases the history of social development, but in some cases also the history of economic devastation and economic destruction in our communities, has rendered them unable to produce any healthy crops. So talking about this from a First Nations perspective, you have to start with the fundamental idea that these First Nations communities are self-determining and are able to pursue a lot of their own initiatives in this way and can use a lot of the money they have to invest in these programs, and as well through that provide opportunities for young people to become involved, provide opportunities for employment, and then really move towards making themselves a lot more independent or really sovereign First Nations.

*GM:* So there's a lot of positive things that can come from this green jobs / green economy movement, yeah. And then you were talking about getting youth involved, and another thing you're involved with is the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition ([www.ourclimate.ca](http://www.ourclimate.ca)), and there's something coming up with that around green jobs ...

*BP:* Yeah, so within the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition we've been discussing this issue for a number of months as well, and we also work with a lot of our coalition partners who include groups like the Canadian Labour Congress and the Canadian Auto Workers' Union, who've been focused on the ideas of green jobs for years now really, and we started to

into the long run. Those are the kind of things we really need to be talking about.

*GM:* So when you say we, who – those things you mentioned as threats, are all, I would say and I think the book, *The Green Collar Economy*, says that those are people that need to be brought into the conversation, but I guess what you're saying is that it's not up to them to dominate, or to come up with a solution, it's just play a role that is led by the grassroots?

*BP:* Yeah that's really how I see it. I think that's the only way that it can go forward as a movement and maintain these principles that I've outlined here, that I think it really needs to, to in any way attempt to tackle these struggles for environmental and social justice, because otherwise it just becomes another environmental initiative that's limited to rich communities who are able to buy organic food and who are able to buy solar panels. If we don't actually make sure that it's led by communities, it's not going to be the poorer communities who get access to their own sources of energy, who get access to energy audits – for example the Energy Guide program here in Canada was shut down on a massive scale. And it's going to be especially immigrant and poorer communities who don't have access to education and training who are not going to be able to get those jobs, and are not going to be able to be involved in setting up any of those programs. So that's why it's really crucial to make sure that, as this movement expands, which it will, these communities are able to be there at the table as some of the main initiators of this discussion. And I think that's why it's crucial that we have to really start getting these people involved now.

*GM:* And how do we do that?

*BP:* I've already been part of one really fascinating meeting in Toronto, actually. I was invited to speak at this meeting with a number of community organizers from Jane and Finch, as well as the Canadian Auto Workers' Union, who have a factory based out of the Jane and Finch community, so they have a local union there and I guess they're pretty involved in the local area. They basically brought together all these different people from community centres, from health centres, from child

service centres, and from actual community organizing groups in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood district and started to talk about green jobs in the community. And, to my surprise actually, one of the community centres in Jane and Finch had already gone ahead and gotten some money to hire some people to do training for the young people in the community and by the end of this year they should be able to go and do some preliminary energy audits and environmental audits within their community, and then with further money be able to actually start implementing some of these programs and look towards more long term planning and community involvement in this initiative. I think that really here highlights an ideal way that this process can be brought about, is in led and organized and started by community groups, but supported by groups who are willing to come out there, support them, rally around it, and contribute their resources, material, their time and people to the efforts. And it wasn't just the Canadian Auto Workers' Union: the people from Jane and Finch community invited myself as well on behalf of the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition, knowing that we've been starting to organize around this, they invited a few people from some environmental groups from within Toronto, one or two academic people who've been following this idea, and so the idea is really that this kind of thing can expand, this is just one neighbourhood that's already gotten the ball moving, but this can quickly expand to other communities as soon as that light bulb turns on and people say, this is something that is going to be long-term beneficial, it's going to save people money, it's going to get us involved, give people jobs, give people training, give people opportunity to tackle a lot of the economic problems and poverty and social issues, and at the same time be a significant contributor to green jobs and the green economy in Canada.

*GM:* So you mentioned in Canada; Green For All, where you were at, is mainly an American-based organization, and I think you were the only Canadian person at the Academy?

*BP:* Yeah, there were 49 Americans that were part of the Academy, and myself, the lone Canadian. So yeah, it was an interesting dialogue for that reason, where a lot of the discussions focused on the U.S. recovery plan, Obama's \$800

billion stimulus package of which there's a significant portion that's actually dedicated to the green economy and green jobs training programs, implementation programs, employment programs. So a lot of the work I think in the U.S. was getting that initial money pushed through the government. It's sad to say this, this kind of shift in society can't be dependent solely on individual citizens or the goodwill of the corporate sector, it's going to have to come about fundamentally with support of government and with fundamental financial backing by the government as well. And so what in the U.S. you're seeing is they have hundreds of millions of dollars that are being doled out across the U.S. in different counties and people at this conference were in many cases discussing how they would be able to get their own organizations, their own community groups, able to organize in the first place, organize themselves, and then be part of figuring out at a city level how the money is going to be doled out, who gets to have their own little projects, their own little programs within their communities. And so that really was what a lot of the American groups there were focused on, was they already have an identified path into this green economy, whereas I think here in Canada we really haven't seen that, that any sort of grassroots movement's come out, and the political movement has really just started. For me myself, that's what I saw as being the real challenge here in Canada, we actually have to start and create a movement that will be able to bring about significant contributions by the government, the financial backing to really create the impetus for this program. And in the meantime it can be supported by some community groups, and some of them have gone and gotten grants, gotten funding, and that will be great for getting that initial experience. But to really have this in every neighbourhood across Canada we really need all levels of government to really step up.

*GM:* So you're obviously involved with this here in Canada and you're part of the Indigenous Environmental Network ([www.ienearth.org](http://www.ienearth.org)). You're coming up with some strategy on this?

*BP:* Yeah, well, I can't speak too extensively about that because we don't really have one identified policy yet, we're working on that right now, but the key difference within First