We Need a Green New Deal

My brilliant young cousin -- we'll call her Linda Pearl -- works as a rocket scientist at a local aerospace plant a few miles from LAX. Linda Pearl considers herself one of the lucky college grads who landed a job in the space end of the aerospace industry. Some of her friends, the not-so-lucky ones, are designing drones for a living, knowing all the while that these euphemistically-called unmanned aerial vehicles sometimes miss their terrorist target and tragically blow up an innocent wedding party in Afghanistan.

Linda Pearl tells me about a friend of hers, a drone-designer, who dreamed some video warrior in the Nevada desert, where these drones are operated by remote control, pressed the wrong button and accidentally bombed my cousin's friend in her bedroom in the United States. "She's still designing these drones, though," my cousin tells me, adding the kicker, "that's where the money is, the jobs, in military contracts, in building sophisticated weapons systems."

Imagine if the U.S. government provided a plethora of alternatives for the best and brightest of our engineering graduates. After all, if an engineer can design a drone, certainly this sharp young mind can build a rapid transit system to get us where we need to go -- sustainability.

In Washington, President Obama and the Democrats are working on a multi-billion dollar jobs bill. In his Thanksgiving message, the President said, "And it is my fervent hope -- and my heartfelt expectation -- that next Thanksgiving we will be able to celebrate the fact that many of those who have lost their jobs are back at work."

Congress would be wise to model a new green job stimulus package after a proven program: the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the 1935 Roosevelt Depression brainchild that employed an estimated 10-million Americans building 850 airports, 110,000 libraries, schools, and hospitals, 500 water treatment plants, 78,000 bridges, and 8,000 parks. The WPA also employed writers and artists, many of whom painted murals in post offices, like the San Pedro post office on Beacon Street, where inside the Art Deco building of marble and chrome we find a WPA mural depicting the history of the harbor.

We need a Green New Deal that would fund jobs both in the public and private sector to develop renewables in solar and wind, build light rail in all the major metropolitan areas, particularly sprawling Los Angeles, and repair our aging infrastructure. Let the bursting levees in New Orleans serve not as a harbinger of dark days but as a warning that unless we fix our ports, our bridges, our water and sewage treatment facilities, we will find ourselves in a world of hurt.

Google "Top Ten Green Jobs of the Future" and you'll read about the need for organic farmers, solar panel installers, wind turbine developers, energy-efficiency builders, waste recyclers, mass transit engineers, hydrologists, urban planners, electric and hybrid car manufacturers, and drought-resistant landscapers.

Notice, the phrase "defense contractor" was not listed.

War is not a Green job.

Flying 100,000 troops to a far off land to fight an ever-morphing enemy leaves a huge carbon footprint; bombing cities and then rebuilding them emits a carbon monster.

Plus, war is not job smart. In The U.S. Employment Effects of Military and Defense Spending Priorities (Institute for Policy Studies/Oct., 2007) economics researchers Robert Pollin and Heidi Garrett-Peltier analyze the effect of
spending a billion dollars, using 2005 employment statistics, to create jobs in various industries. According to the researchers, a billion dollars invested in military contracting nets 8,555 jobs; the same billion invested in education nets 17,687 jobs; the same billion invested in mass transit nets 20,000 jobs.

As I campaign for Congress in the 36th district, those familiar with my anti-war activism often ask, "How can you win in a district full of military contractors -- Los Angeles Air Force Base, Northrop Grumman, Boeing, Raytheon? Employees in these defense plants need to work."

I agree. No one wants to lose his job. Not the assembly line worker at the auto plant in Detroit, nor the missile defense worker laid off at Boeing in El Segundo.

But what if my cousin's friend designing the drone could enjoy even greater job security designing a monorail?

We need our aerospace workers, highly-educated engineers and mechanics, now more than ever before to fill the jobs in the emerging Green economy.

Obama's first recovery plan, the American Reinvestment & Recovery Act, funded "shovel-ready" jobs: storm drain clean up; energy retrofits; highway repairs.

President Obama's second recovery plan must invest in future industries with large pay-offs in terms of career-path learning and earning opportunities in the Green economy. Put laid-off Boeing missile defense workers back on the job building electric buses for the future. Put college professors back to work in Green Energy Departments at universities across the country. Put steelworkers back to work strengthening our bridges in earthquake-prone California. Put everyone with a hard hat back to work building solar panel parts now outsourced to China.

How are we going to pay for this Green New Deal?

Begin with some of the left-over billions in the bank-bail-out kitty. Next, cut the fat in the bloated military budget, a sacred cow that is larger than all the world's military budgets combined, and reemploy the workforce in the Green economy. Bring our troops home from the trillion-dollar wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and honor our veterans with land and lessons in organic farming. Levy a 25-cent tax on every stock transaction on Wall Street and offer stock brokers opportunities to create real wealth developing credit unions that never heard of a sub-prime loan. Close the corporate loopholes that hide billions in bank vaults in the Caribbean and use the cash to hire artists and musicians to inspire our young. Repeal the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and employ doctors and nurses to work in the inner city. End the war on drugs with its obscene prison costs and recruit counselors to open mental health clinics.

When President Roosevelt enacted the New Deal one out of every four Americans was out of work. Today, in California, though the official unemployment rate hovers at 12 %, the real unemployment rate, the one that includes the underemployed and those who have given up looking for a job, is pushing 20%.

Mr. President, look to the past, look to the future. Give us a Green New Deal -- and give aerospace a big piece of the future pie.

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