

How we can protect American jobs in a post-carbon economy | Column

We neglected workers' rights during the last upheaval. Let's get it right this time.



With the U.S. Capitol dome in the background, a sign that reads "Build Bake Better" is displayed before a news conference, Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin) [JACQUELYN MARTIN | AP]

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Just last month, more than 100 members of the U.S. House called for Biden's Build Back Better Act to include \$100 billion for workforce training and development over the next 10 years. It is critical that these worker protection measures be included in the final bill. These funds will be used to help dislocated workers in declining industries find employment and reverse decades of neglect in workforce training, career services and education programs. Workers disrupted during our current economic transition away from an intensive carbon-based economy to a "post-carbon" economy must be protected.

We cannot repeat the neglect of workers' rights exhibited by Republican and Democratic administrations toward those who lost their jobs due to increased economic globalization at the beginning of the 21st century. Workers in trade-exposed industries saw their wages fall and their jobs eliminated as these businesses were unable to compete with foreign firms paying similarly skilled workers much lower wages. For example, scholars at the Council on Foreign Relations note that free trade agreements that began in the late 1990s led to a loss in the United States of approximately 350,000 jobs in the automobile industry alone. Overall, the U.S. economy has continued to be flooded with imports from low-wage countries, especially China. Workers displaced during this upheaval have minimal access to retraining and assistance programs and face extreme difficulty finding employment in other sectors of the economy.



William Felice [UNKNOWN]
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The economically advanced European countries, on the other hand, implemented policies to help their workers adjust to the disruptions and dislocations caused by globalization. France and Germany spend five times as much as the U.S. on helping unemployed workers get back into the workforce. In fact, every major advanced European country spends at least twice as much as the United States on these worker protection programs. Denmark is exceptional, spending more than 2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on worker-retraining programs, which is about 20 times that of the United States. When a factory in Denmark closes, government counselors meet with each unemployed worker and draw up individual plans for retraining. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, reported on the closing of a Danish meatpacking plant with 500 workers. Within 10 months of the closing, all but 60 were back at work.

The U.S. economy is divided between a carbon economy in decline and a post-carbon economy adapting to the reality of climate change. While fossil fuels account for 79% of U.S. energy consumption, the share of energy consumption from renewable sources, such as solar and wind, has doubled since 1980 to 21% in 2020. This has led to economic upheaval in the traditional energy sectors, including coal, creating severe job loss. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that there were only 46,600 coal mining jobs in 2020 compared to 90,000 in 2012. Job losses in coal and other fossil fuel sectors are happening across the country. These workers displaced by this shift away from coal and fossil fuels must be given a fair shot in a low-carbon economy.

Biden's Build Back Better Act can provide some of the funding necessary to help all American workers gain full employment during the transition to a post-carbon economy. The Congressional Budget Office reports that the costs in Biden's proposal are almost completely paid for and the act would not have a significant impact on the budget deficit. Build Back Better would expand the deficit by only 0.6 percent of GDP and this would shrink over time.

Adjustment assistance and workforce training funds in the Build Back Better Act can help to ease the economic hardship and pain that thousands of American workers face during this difficult transition to a post-carbon economy. Congress must act accordingly and stand with American workers.

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