A cleaner, brighter future for our children -- who doesn't want that? Urban areas that are more livable, free of smog and congestion. High-wage jobs in manufacturing, transportation and energy industries that are greener and more sustainable than ever before -- sign me up!

More than 350 people from 39 states and five countries gathered in Yellow Springs, Ohio in late September 2005 to learn how to prepare for the end of cheap oil. That's right, arguably global oil production has peaked, or soon will, meaning that oil will become increasingly scarce and expensive. No one knows whether peak-oil predictions are right, but the 5-fold increase in the price of oil in the last 5 years -- from $10 per barrel in 2000 to $50 per barrel in 2005 -- gives credence to the peak-oil theory. Expensive oil poses a major challenge for the U.S. where 36% of our energy comes from oil.[1] Rising oil prices will affect every aspect of life -- food, drugs, transportation, suburban sprawl, the globalized economy (which manifests itself as cheap goods shipped from China to Wal-Mart) -- all depend on cheap oil. And though we gripe about paying $3 a gallon for gasoline at the pump, the true costs of an oil economy go much deeper -- global warming, massive pollution of our air, food and water, and foreign wars that are costing us upwards of $75 billion dollars a year. All the costs of our oil-based economy are rising steadily.

Just as American consumers and industry made the transition from whale-oil to petroleum over a century ago, an exciting -- if somewhat daunting -- transition lies ahead. Today we derive 80% percent of our energy from coal, oil and natural gas -- these fossil fuels' overwhelmingly power our economy. We've built a comfortable lifestyle on these cheap and abundant sources of energy but at tremendous cost to the environment, public health and national security. Now that oil production has arguably peaked, the question is not if we will find a better way of powering our economy, but when -- and what standard of living we can maintain without cheap oil.

An important step has been taken to get us off oil. The Apollo Alliance -- a coalition of labor unions, environmental groups and urban leaders, now in its third year, is taking a stand for a cleaner- energy economy intended to free us from foreign oil by 2015. This will happen through greater energy efficiency, economic innovation and reinvigorated manufacturing, transportation and energy industries. As millions of high-wage manufacturing jobs have been funneled overseas in recent years, labor realizes it must be more aggressive. Environmentalists, faced with twenty years of negligible progress on the biggest ecological challenges of our times global warming and widespread declines of species and habitats -- realize that we need strategic initiatives that can align labor, industry and the public good. And the urban cores of our cities are sorely in need of renovation, effective mass-transit, living-wage jobs, and a cleaner environment. Apollo tackles all these problems simultaneously.

The Apollo Alliance is targeting policy change at local, regional and national levels based on the dual planks of energy efficiency and renewable power generation -- both of which translate into a high tech, high-wage future for America's workforce. The Apollo Alliance calls for a $300 billion investment of private and public money over ten years (much less than we are currently spending annually on foreign wars). This will go towards clean energy, efficient building and manufacturing, and next-generation transportation that includes electric-hybrid, flexible-fuel, biodiesel and fuel-cell vehicles.

The plan is to create more than 3 million high-wage jobs, energy bill savings of up to 15% and improvements in our trade balance of about $200 billion; plus an added $1 trillion in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) over ten years.[2]

The Alliance helped create the New Apollo Energy Act of 2005 (H.R. 2828), that will use tax incentives and market-based assistance, along with energy performance standards, to address three challenges to the U.S.: creating clean energy manufacturing jobs, decreasing dependence on foreign oil, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Clean energy is good for the environment and creates high-wage jobs.

Renewable energy production (wind, solar, geothermal and biofuels) will increasingly create jobs and produce affordable electricity and fuels. The solar industry produces 5.65 jobs per million dollars invested, the wind energy industry 5.7 jobs, and the coal industry 3.96 jobs.[3]

According to the Alliance, if we developed just 10% of the wind potential of the ten windiest American cities we could reduce total U.S. carbon emissions by a third.[4] The Los Angeles Times reports that with natural gas prices rising, wind-energy has become as cost effective as traditional coal and gas sources in many parts of the country; and wind generator manufactures are sold out through 2008.[5]

"Four years into an economic recovery, workers across America should be riding high. Instead, they're facing new demands to surrender hard-won benefits and agree to wage concessions," reports the Los Angeles Times.[6] Apollo would transform the transportation industries to produce much more fuel-efficient cars, trucks and planes and in the process reinvigorate manufacturing jobs.

Katrina Vanden Heuvel, editor of The Nation, reports that the Apollo program is "being taken seriously by investors, as it begins to attract significant venture capital." She cites the
billion dollar investment by Green Wave (funded by public employee pension funds in California) in energy efficiency and clean technology firms.[2]

Seven state governors have endorsed the Alliance's platform focusing on the need for tax credits for renewable energy projects, federal loan guarantees, urban renewal, and green building standards. In collaboration with Local Governments for Sustainability, the Alliance is pushing energy-saving policies for urban areas. Seattle (WA) recently passed an ordinance requiring publicly funded buildings to meet strict standards in accordance with gold LEED certification for environmentally-friendly buildings.

The founders of the Apollo Alliance asked Americans, "What's the most important issue right now?" Seventy-two percent said economic distress and loss of manufacturing jobs. And 72 percent said they would strongly support a plan that would aggressively develop a green economy and be an engine for 1 to 3 million new manufacturing jobs.[7] Even if Apollo creates just a million jobs that would be a big boost to an economy that has lost 2 million in the last three years.[4]

But is Apollo enough? Let's assume the Apollo Alliance is successful and by 2015 we have weaned ourselves from the grip of foreign and domestic oil. We've greened the economy, created high-wage manufacturing jobs -- even saved the U.S. auto industry -- and greatly improved our overall energy efficiency. What then? Green-house-gas-free alternative energy will be meeting perhaps 40% percent of our energy needs at best. We will still be relying on coal-burning power plants -- currently meeting 23% of our energy needs but slated to rise to 40% in the coming decades -- and natural gas, pumping massive quantities of CO2 into the atmosphere, not to mention the sulfur, mercury, and other toxicants released from coal.

Still, if 'clean' coal technology was widely applied in the U.S. we could reduce net green-house gas emissions. Also known as carbon sequestration, this involves using 20 to 50% of the energy we derive from coal to capture and store the CO2 that is released when coal is burned. This is an expensive prospect and not everyone may be able to afford to capture coal's CO2 and toxic emissions. The developing countries, especially India and China, are planning to double their current greenhouse gas emissions from burning coal in the next fifty years. They are not planning for large-scale carbon capture and storage of which there are very few commercial examples in all the world today.[9,10]

Even if we manage to avert catastrophic global warming -- and are able to maintain some semblance of our current living standards -- what then? We will still have to grapple with the bigger issues of global poverty and inequitable resource distribution, the loss of biodiversity, and the fact that endless economic growth is impossible on a finite planet. The oil problem that Apollo is tackling is the low hanging fruit -- an important step, no doubt, but one that doesn't answer the bigger question: How do we reconcile a world with 7 billion people all clamoring for a western lifestyle? Even environmentalists aren't talking much about this because it forces us to look at our false premise of endless economic growth. It's heresy to question perpetual growth, but -- sooner rather than later -- we must have that conversation.

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