

The Fight for Good Jobs and Clean Air at the Port of Oakland

By Rui Bing Zheng and Andrew Dadko

During the current Great Recession, we have witnessed the U.S. government's multibillion dollar bailouts of private industry, a flood of foreclosures, and the worst unemployment in our generation.

In Oakland, where the unemployment rate was high before the recession (8 percent in 2005), the national fiscal crisis has exacerbated the situation. Families continue to struggle with the lack of accessible good jobs (17 percent unemployed), flat-lined incomes, and disparities in earnings (African Americans earn 60 cents on the dollar and Latinos about 47 cents compared to their white counterparts). Two out of five East Bay residents living in poverty are actually working full- or part-time. Years of urban disinvestment, poverty, and unemployment have locked Oakland residents in a "perpetual recession." Now is our opportunity to break this cycle.

It is no longer enough to simply contribute to an economic recovery; we must address the root causes of economic injustice, such as a lack of family-sustaining jobs and barriers to employment that leave marginalized communities behind, in good times and in bad.

EBASE Works to Rebuild Oakland's Middle Class

The East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE) was founded in 1999 when a groundbreaking collaboration between labor, community, and faith groups won the Oakland Living Wage Ordinance, which boosted wages for city service workers. Since then, EBASE has won seven living wage policies for 2,000 workers, created better workplace conditions for 17,000 others, and connected 1,000 local residents to family-sustaining jobs.

Now EBASE has an unprecedented opportunity to advance grassroots, local solutions for rebuilding Oakland's once thriving middle class with the Revive Oakland and Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports campaigns. Both campaigns will impact one of the most

significant economic drivers in Northern California—the Port of Oakland. The Port handles 99 percent of the containerized traffic (valued at over \$55 billion) in and out of Northern California and supports 450,000 jobs.

The transportation and logistics industry cluster in Northern California employs 282,000 workers. As a sector, it accounts for 6 percent of the regional employment and is projected to grow. Oakland Port is the regional center of the goods movement industry—the part of the economy that transports goods from their place of origin (primarily overseas) to their final retail destination (U.S. stores). EBASE's goal is to ensure that the Port and the growing goods movement industry are accountable to the community.

Investing in Local Jobs Through Revive Oakland

The Oakland Army Base is a 333-acre site in West Oakland jointly owned by the Port and the City of Oakland. After years of negotiations and failed proposals for the site, the City and the Port are finally moving forward to close the deal on a redevelopment project with Prologis (an international multibillion dollar corporation) and local developer CCG by early 2012.

The \$800 million redevelopment plan—subsidized by tens of millions of public dollars—will transform the site into a state-of-the-art international trade and logistics center servicing the Port, making it one of the largest development and job creation projects in over 50 years. It presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring an estimated 6,000 jobs to Oakland over the next two decades. To make the opportunity a reality, EBASE has convened Revive Oakland, a community-

labor-faith coalition of 30 organizations working to secure a community jobs agreement for the project. The enforceable agreement would create family-supporting jobs, such as inventory clerks, package handlers, and forklift operators; provide access to these jobs for low-income communities of color through local hiring and jobs training; and remove discrimination barriers by “banning the box” that asks about criminal records during the application process.

As our government leaders balance budgets by cutting critical services and demand that public workers share the burden, we must ensure that projects, such as the Oakland Army Base redevelopment—where approximately 40 cents of every dollar spent will come from taxpayers—give a return on their investment by prioritizing community needs.

Port Trucking Companies Cheat Local Communities

The growing goods movement industry at the Port of Oakland should actually be a catalyst for good jobs and a sustainable environment. In reality, low-income communities of color and poverty-stricken truck drivers often end up paying the price for the movement of goods to and from the Port.

Communities near the Port frequently are plagued by asthma and cancer associated with exposure to diesel pollution. One out of five children in West Oakland (the neighborhood closest to the Port) suffers from asthma, and the life expectancy of West Oakland residents is 10 years less than that of residents of the Oakland Hills. As the workhorses of the goods movement industry, truck drivers pay a tremendous price in terms of their health and welfare. Most are paid under \$29,000 annually for a 60-hour plus workweek. Seventy-six percent make less than the city’s living wage requirement and 29 percent earn below the California minimum wage. Of the Port’s estimated 2,000 truck drivers, 93 percent are immigrants.

The crux of the problem lies in the widespread—82 percent, according to a recent study by the National Employment Law Project—illegal practice of classifying port truck drivers as “independent contractors” rather than as employees by port trucking companies. This places the burden of truck purchase, maintenance, insurance, tolls, and taxes on the truck driver. Companies are able to evade taxes and their share of Social

Security payments, while denying workers minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workers compensation, disability insurance, health and safety law protections, and the right to organize for fair wages and benefits. Under the current system, the cost of truck replacement and upgrades has fallen primarily on taxpayers and truck drivers.

The Oakland Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports (CCSP), which EBASE co-convenes with 80 organizations, brings together port drivers with environmental, community, labor, faith, and public health allies to reduce air pollution and improve job quality at the Port of Oakland. Ultimately, CCSP aims to secure a comprehensive policy that would shift the financial burden of goods movement and clean trucks onto trucking companies, shippers, and cargo owners.

Public Funds Should Benefit the Community

At a State Assembly hearing on Labor and Employment, long-time port truck driver Manuel Rivas delivered powerful testimony on the price of clean trucking and who really pays for it. Rivas used to haul for Bridge Terminal Transport (BTT) before losing his job on account of his truck failing the new emission standards. BTT, which is owned by Maersk and made \$5 billion in profits last year, refused to pay for a retrofit. Prior to working for BTT, Rivas worked for Shippers Transport Express whose parent company, SSA Marine, is co-owned by Goldman Sachs, which made \$2.3 billion in 2008 and was a major recipient of government bailouts. These companies can bear the costs of greening the port trucking fleet and should be made to do it.

This perpetual recession must not continue in Oakland’s communities. Now is the time to hold companies as well as elected and appointed officials accountable. Shipping companies should not be allowed to profit on the backs of poor immigrant drivers. Public funds invested in projects, such as the redevelopment of the Oakland Army Base, should benefit our communities that have been locked out of the economy by creating good jobs for their residents. The current economic crisis has reignited the work EBASE does to organize and advocate for progressive policies that improve the lives of working people. We now intend to take it to a new level by impacting entire industries. ■

Andrew Dadko is the program director and Rui Bing Zheng is the grants coordinator at EBASE.