Coal war: With a showdown vote expected next month, developer Phil Tagami and backers of Oakland’s new bulk cargo terminal are intensifying their campaign to keep the City Council from blocking coal shipments from the waterfront.

Project loyalists have called a news conference for Monday at which they plan to highlight the thousands of jobs they say will be lost if the council hits the brakes on coal.

“It’s the tech, the marijuana or the port in terms of jobs, and we want to make sure Oakland delivers on its promises of jobs and equity for everyone to live here,” said Ron Muhammad, a West Oakland community organizer.

To underscore the point, a coalition of black ministers, community activists and construction trade representatives plans to attend the news conference at the terminal site on the old Oakland Army Base, where construction already has begun.

Tagami’s forces even plan to trot out at least one doctor to make the case that nearby residents’ health is more endangered by unemployment than any concerns about coal dust.

Mayor Libby Schaaf and council members initially trumpeted the Army base project, pledging $242 million in taxpayer money to kick-start it. But now they’re under pressure from the Sierra Club and other environmental activists worried about not just the health hazards to local residents but also the climate impacts of burning coal globally.

The council is now pondering regulations that could restrict coal from being shipped through the terminal. A vote is tentatively scheduled for June 27. Tagami has warned that blocking coal could sink the entire project. He’s also hinted at possible lawsuits to recover the money invested in the project.
The fight highlights the growing rift that has been emerging nationwide between agenda-driven environmental activists and jobs-focused construction trades — traditionally two of the most loyal Democratic constituencies.

For her part, Schaaf, who opposes the coal shipments, said she’s “committed to adopting the strongest health and safety protections allowed by the law for the bulk terminal.” “It’s a false choice to say that we can’t do both.”