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The Green New Climate Deal

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Climate Movement: What's Next?](#)

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What is the Climate Movement's State of Play?

The climate movement in the US and around the world has gone through two main phases and is entering a third. The first, starting with the confirmation of man-made global warming, was a movement of environmental organizations in alliance with governments and the UN focused primarily on lobbying governments for legislation and international agreements. The second, which gathered steam after the breakdown of climate protection efforts at Copenhagen, was a direct action movement, largely initiated by indigenous movements and 350.org, independent of governments, using civil disobedience targeting fossil fuel infrastructure to mobilize opposition to fossil fuel corporations. The third phase, pioneered by the Sunrise Movement and expressed in the massive activity around the Green New Deal (GND), is a complex phenomenon with several important novel aspects.

One novelty of this new configuration is its relation to the political system. Sunrise has used electoral, lobbying, and direct action techniques to target the Democratic Party, challenging the leadership for inaction and fossil-fuel-funded politicians for their opposition to climate protection. It has thereby contrasted the indecisiveness of Democratic leaders with a climate-passionate Democratic rank and file. At the same time, it has supported a new wing of climate protection candidates. This strategy is rather similar to the Tea Party's strategy in the Republican Party. Indeed, it reflects a more general breakdown in the boundary between political parties and social movements. The Extinction Rebellion and the Student Strike for Climate movements also represent a shift to using direct action techniques against governments and politicians.

A second shift is the GND's advocacy of strong government leadership and authority in the transition to climate safety. This includes economic planning, macroeconomic management, public investment, and extensive regulation and control, modeled on the expanded government economic authority of the New Deal and World War II homefront mobilization. This differs sharply from both the market-oriented strategies of mainstream climate policy and the community-based approaches often advocated by the climate justice movement.

A third feature of the GND is a climate policy that is specifically directed to the needs of the working class. That includes a universal guarantee of jobs for all; expansion of union rights; full employment; extensive apprenticeship and training programs; job ladders; restoration and expansion of the social safety net such as Medicare for All; and policies to eliminate the discrimination and marginalization of historically disadvantaged groups.

A fourth characteristic of the GND is its insistence on public policies that are actually designed to meet the targets and timetables for greenhouse gas reduction laid out by climate science. This contrasts to most previous legislative agendas. While the effort is constantly attacked for being "unrealistic," the insistence on specific goals has put the urgency of the climate emergency on the political agenda in an unprecedented way and forced discussion on what is actually necessary to stabilize the climate.

Sunrise has recruited more than 100 senators and representatives and almost all the announced Democratic presidential candidates to support the GND resolution. It has organized more than 100 Sunrise hubs around the country and over 200 GND town halls in 46 states designed to create an organized base for political and direct action. It is organizing for large-scale mass mobilization at the presidential debates demanding that candidates support the GND. Its leaders regularly point out that even if a GND supporter is elected president, massive popular mobilization will be necessary to overcome the resistance to a genuine GND.

The GND movement is surrounded by dangers. Most obvious is the counterattack from the right based on fear and distortion. But the GND is also threatened by some of those who should be its strongest supporters. Parts of organized labor that have allied with the fossil fuel industry have

exercised hegemony over the energy policy of major unions. While the GND is wildly popular with the Democratic Party base, much of the leadership, influenced in part by large fossil fuel industry contributions, has treated it as a threat to be managed.

Even parts of the progressive, climate, and climate justice movements, while giving verbal support to a “green new deal” of some sort, have stood aloof from many of the GND’s most positive elements. Whether driven by honest disagreements, turf protection, or other motives, there has been widespread skepticism on the left about such GND elements as the jobs guarantee and the rapid timetable for the transition to fossil-free energy. Meanwhile, GND advocates call for wide discussion of policies to implement such objectives. Anyone who cares about climate, workers, and justice can participate in that discussion—in the context of fighting for the GND.

Opposition from the friends of fossil fuels, combined with tepid support from the supposed friends of climate protection, workers, and justice, could easily turn the GND into one more inadequate, toothless, feel-good public relations fig leaf. In a worst-case scenario, the initiative could morph into a cover for expanding nuclear energy, geoengineering, “clean coal,” and other environmental nightmares. Fortunately, we have the start of a GND movement that is alert to these dangers and mobilizing to push back against them. The outcome is likely to be largely determined by how hard those of us who should be fighting for the GND actually do so.

“System Change, Not Climate Change”?

Mainstream climate policy has largely accepted the priority of profit maximization, hoping that climate protection can be made profitable through some combination of subsidies and incentives. In the US context, the Green New Deal represents a sharp break with those priorities. It calls for the government to use its authority to radically reduce fossil fuel emissions and to do so in a way that increases the power of workers and reduces multiple forms of social injustice. While such policies represent a change in the existing system, they certainly do not represent the replacement of capitalism by a system without private property, markets, competition, classes, or the profit motive.

Can GND-type policies in themselves radically reduce climate destruction? Can they be implemented without more radical changes in the capitalist economy? The truth is that we don't know how compatible effective climate protection is with capitalism. On the one hand, we know that the threat of modest reforms can lead to capital flight and capital strikes. On the other hand, we know that capitalism has taken such enormous changes as the abolition of slavery and the mid-twentieth-century institutionalization of trade unions and collective bargaining in its stride.

The rational thing to do under such conditions of uncertainty is to start implementing the measures that are necessary to protect the climate while compensating for the negative consequences we can clearly anticipate. We know that shutting down fossil fuel use will threaten the jobs of fossil fuel workers and their communities; we therefore must implement just transition policies that provide them an acceptable alternative. We know that halting GHG emissions will radically reduce existing energy production; we therefore must have a planned phase-in of an alternative energy system. We know that major changes in the economy can lead to destabilization and depression; we therefore must have macroeconomic policies available to counter such effects.

It is possible that climate protection will require further changes. Elimination of fossil fuels might raise energy costs, although this seems unlikely given the fall in the costs of renewable energy. The energy industry and the investor class might engage in a capital strike, refusing to invest in fossil-free energy even if it meant bringing on economic chaos and depression. In such an event, a government committed to climate protection would have to intervene and use its authority to control or take over the industry – as it did in World War II. And it would have to use macroeconomic policy to counter depression. It is worth thinking about such contingencies in advance, but concrete policies will need to flow from the actual problems that people face along the way to climate safety.

Effective climate protection will still leave a host of devastating problems here on earth. The struggle against them will undoubtedly need to continue and grow. The GND can provide a starting point for that struggle—or serve as a vehicle for its cooptation. What is needed to

drive it farther and prevent cooptation is a movement that keeps pushing for it—and keeps pushing it.

Do We Need a Meta-Movement?

Do we need a meta-movement “binding disparate movements into a coherent force for a just and sustainable future?” The Green New Deal already is such a movement. It integrates the needs and demands of environmentalism, ecological restoration, social justice, racial equality, workers’ rights, restorative agriculture, and many other challenges to our unjust and unsustainable world order into a practical program which, if inevitably imperfect, provides an opportunity to fix what we know how to fix and get a crash course in how to fix the rest. The GND cannot and should not try to subsume all the other necessary movements, but it can serve as a zone of convergence for a meta-movement that pools the power of many movements in the interest of human survival.

That emerging meta-movement goes far beyond the borders of the US. The vision of the GND is spreading worldwide. It is being adopted by the climate movement in many countries. In Europe, DiEM25 and the European Spring coalition are campaigning for a detailed Green New Deal agenda. In the UK, a new campaign is pushing similar legislation. The GND has become a core element of the program of the worldwide Student Strike for Climate.

The next phase of the climate movement is here. It may provide a last opportunity that many of us thought we would never have. Are we willing to let that opportunity slip through our fingers?

About the Author



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