

Whatever Happened to the Green New Deal?

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The Green New Deal was the signature issue of the Green Party in the 2010s. Howie Hawkins was the first US candidate to campaign for a Green New Deal in 2010 running for New York governor. The Green Party's presidential candidate in 2012 and 2016, Jill Stein, made "A Green New Deal for America" the theme of her two campaigns.

The ecosocialist Green New Deal proposed by the Green Party's 2020 presidential candidate, Howie Hawkins, is a 10-year, \$27.5 trillion a program to achieve zero-to-negation carbon emissions and 100% clean energy by 2030. It also includes an additional \$1.4 trillion a year for an Economic Bill of Rights to a guaranteed job, a guaranteed income above poverty, affordable housing, Medicare for All, lifelong tuition-free public education, and a secure retirement by doubling Social Security benefits.

This ecosocialist approach features extensive public ownership and planning, particularly in the energy, transportation, and manufacturing sectors, in order to achieve its goals in a decade. To support the conversion of industrialized, pesticide-dependent corporate agriculture to organic farms owned by working farmers that rebuild carbon-capturing living soils, the ecosocialist Green New Deal provides income guarantees, parity pricing and supply management for all agricultural products in order to ensure that working farmers and farmworkers have decent incomes and economic security.

The ecosocialist approach recognizes that capitalism's destruction of the climate and exploitation of people are part of the same process. It recognizes that in order to harmonize society with nature we must harmonize human with human by ending economic exploitation and all forms of oppression. It calls for an ecosocialist economic democracy that meets the basic needs of all within ecological limits. In the World War II emergency, the federal government took over a quarter of the nation's manufacturing capacity in order to turn industry on a dime into the Arsenal of Democracy to arm the Allied powers to defeat the fascist imperialists of the Axis powers. We need to do nothing less through the public sector to defeat climate chaos.

Instead the Democrats have taken the Green Party's Green New Deal slogan, divested it of real content, and finally abandoned it altogether in the 2020 Democratic platform. Much of the climate justice movement is settling for these non-solutions as the "lesser evil." It is now obvious that the Democrats are not going to enact a Green New Deal. Donald Trump may call climate change a hoax, but the Democrats are acting as if its a hoax.

The question now for progressives and climate activists is, How are they going to vote against Trump? Are they going to settle for Biden who has no climate solutions and get taken for granted? Or are they going to vote for the Green ticket and the ecosocialist Green New Deal and make the politicians hear their demands and compete for their votes?

The Green New Deal went viral in the media in November 2018 after the Sunrise Movement and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) staged a sit-in in soon-to-be Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office demanding a Green New Deal. A December 2018 poll showed that 81% of Americans, including 64% of Republicans, supported a Green New Deal.

Now, in August 2020, the Green New Deal is not mentioned in the Democratic platform. Joe Biden's energy policy supports fracking the hell out of the country for gas and oil, does not call for ending \$20 billion a year in subsidies and tax breaks to the fossil fuel industry, supports building an uneconomical massive infrastructure for carbon capture and sequestration from gas-fired power plants, and supports building more nuclear power plants that have a levelized cost that is two to three times more expensive most forms of solar or wind energy.

What follows is the back story about how the Democrats took the Green New Deal slogan and diluted its content down to nothing serious. We have had a ringside view of these developments. Jon Rynn's 2010 book, *Manufacturing Green Prosperity*, makes the case for public enterprise and planning to rebuild our economy's infrastructure and particularly its manufacturing base around clean energy and environmental sustainability. That book and subsequent writing and consulting with Greens has played a big role in shaping the ecosocialist Green New Deal that the Hawkins campaign is proposing. As an advisor to both the Hawkins and Stein campaigns, climate activist Mark Dunlea helped formulate their Green New Deal policies over the last decade.

On November 13, 2018, the newly elected congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), along with members of the Sunrise Movement, occupied Pelosi's office to demand the implementation of a Green New Deal (GND). AOC had advocated for a GND in her shocking victorious primary campaign, and now the idea looked to take off and change the political landscape. Journalists and politicians, who had been skeptical of anything bold when it came to climate change, rushed to proclaim the clear logic and necessity of the as-yet not-well-defined program. Seemingly overnight, interest in climate change increased greatly, because something happened that no one had considered: when you offer a solution that actually could work, and a solution that would help the average American, the problem *and* solution gains the attention of the public. Otherwise, if everything is hopeless, why bother? With the GND, it seemed, there was now some hope.

But everything went downhill from there. Speaker Pelosi rejected the demand of the Sunrise Movement for a Select Committee on a Green New Deal that could put legislation on the floor of the House. Derisively dismissing the Green New Deal as "the green dream or

whatever they call it,” Pelosi set up her own Select Committee on Climate Crisis, chaired by moderate Pelosi foot-soldier Rep. Kathy Castor (D-FL) and modeled after a previous select committee on climate Pelosi set up when the Democrats controlled the House from 2007 to 2011. That committee and the Democratic House passed no significant climate legislation. The new climate committee is not empowered to put legislation on the House floor. All such legislation would have to go through the Energy and Commerce Committee, chaired by Frank Pallone (D-NJ), a fossil fuels friendly politician who defends campaign funding from that industry.

As a fall back position, AOC teamed up with Senator Markey from Massachusetts to submit a Non-Binding Resolution for a Green New Deal, but their GND was just a set of goals. It was the design requirements for a program, laying out the targets of the plan, without explaining how the plan would actually achieve what it hoped to achieve. If the public was excited about the GND because they thought that a real solution was now ready, the rollout of a nonsolution threatened to torpedo the GND entirely.

AOC’s campaign manager in 2018, Vigi Ramos, had been the campaign manager for Jabari Brisport, a Green and Socialist fusion candidate in 2017, who ran on the New York Green Party’s Green New Deal program. When the Green New Deal went viral in the media after the sit-in in Pelosi’s office, Sunrise and AOC not only didn’t give the Green Party any props, they rebuffed Green offers to work in coalition for a real Green New Deal. What really angers Greens now is not so much the lack of credit or solidarity in the fight for climate action, but the dilution of the Green New Deal in the hands of the Democrats.

The nonbinding GND resolution dropped the key demand for a ban on fracking and new fossil fuel infrastructure. If we don’t stop the build-out of pipelines and power plants for fracked gas and for oil for the transportation sector, we will be locked into decades more fossil fuel burning and a cooked planet. They dropped the phase-out of nuclear power, a dirty, dangerous, and uneconomical energy dead-end. The cost of nuclear power is two to three times higher than every form of solar and wind power. Yet AOC and Biden want to build more nukes as part of their climate policy. The nonbinding resolution also left out the demand for deep cuts in military spending with the savings going into the Green New Deal. And the bottom line goal, zero greenhouse gas emissions, was extended from 2030 to 2050. The carbon budgets of climate science indicate that rich countries like the US need to zero out emissions by 2030 if the world is to have a chance of reducing atmospheric carbon below the 350 parts per million standard that climate scientist James Hansen as the upper limit of a safe climate zone and 350.org’s Bill McKibben popularized. But the non-binding resolution gave politicians a 30-year instead of 10-year goal for zero emissions, which is permission to politicians to wait and kick the can down the road.

Then the Democrats didn’t even support the diluted, non-binding GND resolution in Congress. Pelosi has never let the House vote on it. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) decided to call for a vote in the Senate to put the many Senate

Democrats running for president on the record. Markey and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) called McConnell's move a "trick" and advised Democratic Senators to vote "present." All the Democratic Senators followed that order, except for the four Democrats who voted "no" with the Republicans.

Meanwhile, AOC outsourced the details of the plan, the actual solution, to a group of intelligent and well-intentioned people who had no experience in the subject matters that are at the heart of the GND. The New Consensus think tank had recently been formed by a couple of people who had worked for President Obama and Michelle Obama. The policy director, Rhianna Gunn-Wright, was anointed as the 'Green New Deal architect' by David Roberts, environmental writer for Vox.com (and Jon Rynn's editor when they were both writing for Grist.org circa 2007). She was interviewed by many media outlets, as was the head of New Consensus, and we were assured that their plan would be rolled out by January – 2020. To make a long story short, nothing ever emerged and Gunn-Wright would move on to the Roosevelt Institute, but in the meantime there was no explanation about how they were proceeding, who they were talking to, and what exactly they thought should be done. The best we can come up with, after reading many interviews, is that the government should be 'at the table', along with corporations. There was a great deal of verbiage about helping 'frontline communities', which seemed to mainly mean communities of color, which have been ravaged by environmental degradation. There were also kind words for a 'just transition' for fossil fuel workers who could lose their jobs. But there was nothing concrete about how any of these goals might be reached, except to include people in the 'process'. Hawkins' ecosocialist Green New Deal calls for maintaining the wages and benefits of workers displaced by the energy transition as well as by peace conversion of much of the military/industrial complex to the production of civilian goods. It also calls for federal aid to communities whose tax bases suffer from the transition. This ecosocialist Green New Deal projects the creation of 38 million new jobs, which means the transition to alternative work will be swift as well as just.

With this enormous policy vacuum having been created, and a Presidential campaign heating up, Jay Inslee, the governor of Washington and a presidential hopeful, unveiled his climate plan – although he didn't call it a Green New Deal. No matter, Dave Roberts came to the rescue and declared that this was the GND in all but name. The only problem is, this was no Green New Deal.

What excited the public about the GND in the first place was the idea that the federal government would directly employ millions of people to create all the necessary infrastructure to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions by building the various energy and other networks that are necessary. This is what the original New Deal was all about, in addition to several foundational social welfare policies, like Social Security and basic labor laws. Through agencies such as the WPA, PWA and CCC, the federal government directly employed millions of people and built much of the infrastructure that powered the postwar

recovery and that we still use today. But the Democratic Party has moved so far to the right that even its progressive wing cannot fathom the ideas that were taken for granted almost 100 years ago in this country – the concept that the government should build things, not the corporations that got us into this mess in the first place.

Inslee's plan – which is no longer on his website, but is being pushed forward by a new group – boldly proclaimed that \$1 trillion per year would be spent solving the climate crisis – except that 2/3rds of this expenditure was supposed to come from profit-hungry corporations, by shoveling trillions at them to 'incentivize' them to do the right thing. As far as we could tell, none of the federal money would be used to actually build anything. Some would be used to finance research and development that the corporations could then use to make trillions in profits at government expense, and perhaps some would be spent directly on a national electric grid – the wires, not the generators, since the utilities don't really care about the wires because they can't make big profits from that.

It was as if Inslee and company crept up to the edge of the lake of federal public works construction, but couldn't jump in. The other main plank of Inslee's plan was to use regulation to force the obstinate corporations to do the right thing, by, well, telling them to do the right thing – which they are often in the business of explicitly not doing. Instead of calling for constructing a national renewable electricity network, his plan called for telling the utilities to do it themselves by a certain date. These ideas are actually what used to be called 'progressive' 100 years ago, in the administrations from Theodore Roosevelt through Wilson, setting up regulatory agencies and funding certain low level activities. This has been updated in the past few decades with the neoliberal ideas of 'encouraging' corporations, or more generically, 'the market', to produce the things that we know have to be done by using tax incentives and subsidies, even though it would be cheaper, faster, and more efficient if the government directly built that which needs to be built. Sean Sweeney and his partners at Trade Unions for Energy Democracy have shown that the market cannot handle the rollout of renewable energy.

This basic framework has been endlessly repeated. Elizabeth Warren profusely praised Inslee's plan as one of her 'I've got a plan for that' plans. But New Consensus' Gunn-Wright endorsed Warren anyway. The American Prospect magazine put out a special issue on the GND, which centered around Jeffrey Sachs' article, which basically repeated Inslee's approach.

The leadership of the Sunrise Movement kept saying nice things about these various proposals. Sunrise kept organizing, as has Extinction Rebellion (XR), Greta Thunberg, and Fridays for Future, imploring everyone to implement a GND. XR even tried to shut down London, for instance, without having even the bare skeleton of a plan.

Finally, Bernie Sanders put out a GND proposal, which by far was the closest to a real Green New Deal that anybody outside of the Green Party has advocated, actually calling for the federal government to build the entire renewable energy network. Sunrise asked its members which plan they preferred, and fortunately the membership chose Sanders' plan, but neither Sanders nor Sunrise said much about his very concrete proposals. The most Sanders would say, in his speeches or debate appearances, was that "20 million jobs would be created," without going into any more detail than that. Even that was more than what Sunrise did with the plan. In deference to the Democrats they are now campaigning for, the national leadership of the Sunrise Movement has refused to support the frontline demand of the climate justice movement – the ban on fracking and new fossil fuel infrastructure.

Sanders and AOC also introduced last November a Green New Deal Public Housing Act that would retrofit the nation's 1 million units of public housing for energy efficiency. That is a needed program but it does not help the nearly 10 million low income people who cannot find affordable housing. Our ecosocialist GND invest \$2.5 trillion over 10 years to build 25 million new units of public housing that will be powered by clean energy, be mixed-income to reduce economic and racial segregation, and be linked to new public transit to create walkable communities. This public housing program is how we propose to realize the right to affordable housing for all in our GND's Economic Bill of Rights.

The Democratic caucus in the House and the Biden campaign put out climate plans that are completely inadequate and continue the path blazed by Inslee – including a mind-numbing number of wonky, incremental proposals. Inslee had bragged that his proposal was 35 pages long – composed of flaming oratory about the revolutionary nature of each proposal, followed by prose that only someone with a masters degree in public administration could appreciate.

Joe Biden's plan continues the basic trend. For instance, "Biden's climate and environmental justice proposal will make a federal investment of \$1.7 trillion over the next ten years, leveraging additional private sector and state and local investments to total to more than \$5 trillion." The plan later was upgraded to \$2 trillion over, presumably over 4 years, but as of now, there appears to be no publicly available breakdown of how much is being spent or what incentives are being offered. There is talk of upgrading infrastructure, somehow retrofitting housing, and somehow encouraging the use of electric vehicles, as well as using Federal procurement to encourage renewable energy. It seems that the goal of decarbonizing the electrical sector will be made with tax incentives. Unfortunately biofuels are to be encouraged, the promotion of carbon capture and sequestration is a way of supporting fracking for gas and oil without openly saying so, and the failed nuclear power plants of the corrupt investor-owned utilities are to be revived with public subsidies. One of the few concrete goals that came out of the joint Sanders/Biden climate policy committee is to retrofit 2 million homes for energy efficiency in five years. With about 100 million homes in the US, at that rate it will take 300 years to retrofit all US homes.

By contrast, Howie Hawkins [Ecosocialist Green New Deal Budget](#) shows how much each part of a Green New Deal would cost, how many jobs and how many manufacturing jobs it would generate, what it would build, and how it would be paid for. The Green New Deal won't happen unless citizens can easily see how it is going to work; instead, almost all proposals are impenetrable and opaque.

There are a few tips that can be offered for anyone brave enough to peruse these massive GND or climate plan proposals. The first half, at least, of each proposal goes into gory detail about the horrors that are occurring and will take place in the future if we don't do anything. You can safely skip all of this, as there won't be anything newly revealing about what is to come. You will then get to the proposals themselves, which will mainly consist of what they would like the consequences of their policies to be, followed by solutions that clearly can't do what they confidently have just told you they want to do. You can skim all of this, while keeping an eye out for the flicker of the realization that the government could simply directly build out everything they are talking about, without 'unleashing the genius of the market', 'the entrepreneurial spirit of America', or whatever other phrase they have for handing out trillions for big companies. Good luck finding numbers on how much they want to spend.

[The House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis](#) at the end of June released a classic of this genre. Almost every recommendation involves tax credits, regulatory standards, recommendations, anything to avoid the idea that the federal government can directly spend money to construct public works. The report is hundreds of pages long, and like most of these reports, seems to have involved thousands of hours of highly trained peoples' time to create something that nobody will read. If, instead, they had actually tried to figure out what a national plan to build a set of systems would have looked like, it would have been more communicable and might actually have been useful.

David Roberts recently wrote up [a master summary](#) of the various efforts going on now in progressive circles to come to some kind of consensus about a Green New Deal climate, and the various reports embedded in his survey exhibit the same tendencies towards expansive, high-minded goals accompanied by little in the way of implementation. Another recent description by Roberts, called [Rewiring America](#), at least involves some hard numbers on what would be required to decarbonize the economy. For some reason the author includes nuclear power and biomass in his calculations, and those two technologies continue to receive attention completely out of proportion to any possible help they would provide in fighting climate change, never mind their disqualifying side effects. But even though the Rewiring America authors realize that in order to fulfill the needed goals we need a World War II-style public sector mobilization, the plan still relies on incentivizing the market. It's as if, after Pearl Harbor, FDR had proposed changing the tax code.

The bankruptcy of these policy proposals – one would hardly call them plans – is made very clear whenever the example of WWII is brought up. If there is one period in US

history when the Federal government engaged in central planning for production and massive expenditures, it was WWII. Through the Office of War Mobilization and then the War Production Board, federal government took over and planned production for a quarter of US manufacturing capacity to produce the arms and supplies needed to win the war. And yet, somehow these authors are able to discuss the idea of a mobilization without considering this simple fact. This is how far the neoliberal consensus has blinded even those on the progressive side of the spectrum – it is simply unthinkable that we could elect a government that would do what was done in the 1930s and 1940s.

The biggest reason that the Green New Deal has fallen as a beacon of hope for the grassroots is that the very people who would not even consider the idea of the federal government directly spending trillions to recreate our public works are the ones who were then called upon to pontificate and formulate the Green New Deal. For decades, the only acceptable policy discourse has been one that recognizes the efficiency of the private enterprise, and if there are inefficiencies, those are to be ‘solved’ with tax incentives and regulations – these are what pass for government economic policy. Directly building things, as was done in the New Deal, has been completely off the table. Bugged down in wonky neoliberal policy proposals, they couldn’t see the forest for the trees.

Therefore it is no surprise that none of these plans live up the multiple challenges we now face, except for the plan being offered by Howie Hawkins. That plan was written by people who have been campaigning and writing about large-scale proposals for over a decade; progressives need to expand their horizons past mainstream economics and consider an economic framework centered on the government, production, and ecological principles.

The climate justice movement should stop setting itself up to be taken for granted by a Biden administration by settling now for his lesser evil climate policies. Being merely the lesser evil to Donald Trump on climate is an extremely low bar. The movement should heed the advice of the late historian and civil rights and peace activist, Howard Zinn:

When a social movement adopts the compromises of legislators, it has forgotten its role, which is to push and challenge the politicians, not to fall in meekly behind them....Whatever politicians may do, let them first feel the full force of citizens who speak for what is right, not for what is winnable....

Climate change solutions will require a government-led, coordinated effort of building multiple national systems simultaneously that are designed to work together: they must be planned by the government. Fascism again stalks the world, exemplified by the current president, and the left must offer an alternative. There was a politically independent left in the 1930s whose votes FDR could not take for granted. He had to adopt some of their proposals to compete for those votes.

The resulting New Deal was an experience of positive government action that still appeals to people from all parts of the society. Nuclear weapons and the means of war are still threatening life on the planet. The economy has become horribly skewed and unequal, and only the government can provide the jobs that will rebalance power between rulers and the ruled and create a truly just society. Trump famously declared that 'only I can fix it'. We have to get past the 19th century idea that 'only the market can fix it'. Only a democratically elected government that represents the citizens of a country can truly fix 'it', the multiple ecological, economic, and political crises of the 21st century.