

Biden, the Oil Companies, and the Environment

June 2, 2021



This article was written for L'Anticapitaliste, the weekly newspaper of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) of France.

Years of education, protest, and lobbying seem to be finally having an effect on U.S. environmental policies, though not without constant Republican resistance and Democratic vacillation—and so far, neither fast enough nor strong enough for the change we need. The oil and coal companies' relentless drive for profits and their political power represent the great obstacle to lowering CO₂ emissions and saving the planet and the human race from climate change's devastating effects. But beyond that, the entire culture's emphasis on growth—companies, unions, or consumers—represents a barrier to change.

Joseph Biden ran for president as an environmental candidate, pledging to address global warming. On day one as president, he blocked all new gas and oil leases on federal lands and water, stopped the Keystone XL pipeline, and took the United States back into the Paris Climate Agreement. Now he is proposing a 2022 budget with \$36 billion (\$14 billion more than last year) for clean energy, improved water infrastructure, and more research. He also proposes to spend \$174 million to develop electric vehicle infrastructure—though the Republican Party wants only a small fraction of that.

Environmental groups like the League of Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund, and Sunrise, spent some \$1.5 million in the 2020 elections mostly for Biden and other Democrats. Yet, in the last few months the Biden administration has given the go-ahead to various projects either on federal land or necessitating federal approval: the Willow project, a large oil drilling project on Alaska's North Slope, oil and leases in Wyoming, and the continued use of the Dakota Access pipeline. All of these projects were approved by Donald Trump's administration and fiercely opposed by environmental organizations. As Gregory Stewart, a leader of the Alaska chapter of the Sierra Club, said of the Alaska project, "They are opening up a lane for the oil and gas industry to cause irreparable harm to Arctic communities' public health and wildlife habitats."

Since the COVID pandemic, the environmental movement—unlike the racial justice movement's spectacular demonstrations—has not been very visible. While local environmental protests continue, there is no large, active national movement. Environmental activists have focused on support for the Green New Deal legislation sponsored by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey.

"We're going to transition to a 100 percent carbon free-economy, that is more unionized, more just, more dignified and guarantees more health care and housing than we ever have before," Ocasio-Cortez says. "Do we intend on sending a message to the Biden administration that we need to go bigger and bolder? The answer is absolutely yes." The Democratic Socialists of America says of the Green New Deal proposals, "they are conversation starters—not complete and adequate blueprints." While the GND calls for a transition to a more sustainable economy and a more just society, it does not take on the oil and gas companies directly.

The more radical wing of the U.S. environmental movement challenges the culture of growth and argues that carbon emissions can only be reduced by virtually stopping oil drilling and coal mining and closing down and drastically retrenching the industries that drive them: steel, auto, and plastics, among others. To do that, one would have to nationalize the energy industries and bring them under the control of a genuinely democratic government. That is, one needs to fight for socialism as the solution to the climate crisis. As the group System Change not Climate changes states, "The current ecological crisis results from the capitalist system, which values profits for a global ruling elite over people and the planet. It must therefore be confronted through an international mass movement of working people around the world."