Can the “Green New Deal” Save the Planet?

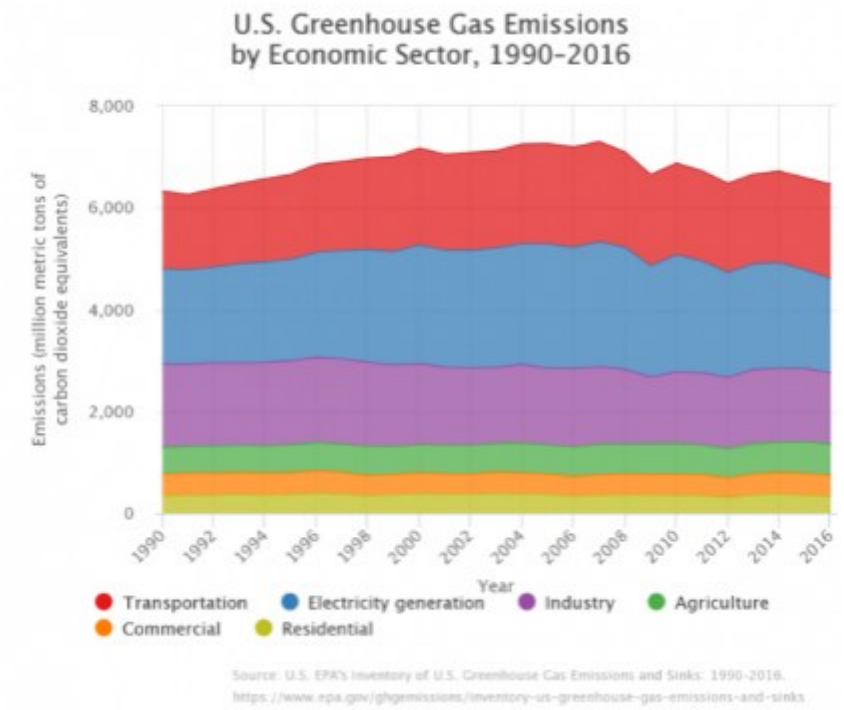
written by John Reimann | March 9, 2019

It is never comfortable to give up long-held beliefs and connections, but the impending climate crisis makes that a burning necessity. And the fact that, scientifically, it’s possible to avoid the worst of this climate disaster gives a positive incentive to do so.

It is with this attitude that we must consider the “Green New Deal” as proposed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

The idea of a “Green New Deal” has been around for quite a few years. Over ten years ago, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman called for it as did Van Jones, former (short-lived) member of the first Obama administration. In fact, Jones wrote an entire book on the issue. In Ocasio-Cortez’s plan, the U.S. would be weaned completely off of fossil fuel by 2030.

So far, so good; this goal is possible. The question is how?



As the graph on the left shows, the top four emitters of greenhouse gas (mainly through the burning of fossil fuel) are transportation, electric generation, industrial production and agriculture. Let's consider them one-by-one:

- **Transportation:** The main cause of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in this sector is from the internal combustion engine and reliance on individually-owned cars. The second half of the pamphlet "The Environmentalist Manifesto" explains how this was inherent in the development of US capitalism itself. Transformation to reliance on mass transit and electric engines would only be accepted if it were accompanied by a massive reduction in the work week with no loss in pay and to making it affordable to live near the average worker's work place.
- **Electric generation:** The electric power companies have fought for years against development of alternatives. Nuclear energy is not an alternative, if for no other reason than that it takes an average of about ten years to simply build a nuclear power plant. (In actuality, there are many other reasons.) To really develop renewable sources on a mass scale requires a total transformation of investment priorities. All the major capitalist interests have opposed and will continue to oppose this. As we explain below, the semi-official position of all wings of the Democratic Party is to even further develop use of natural gas to produce electricity.
- **Manufacturing:** The one major manufacturing industry remaining in the U.S. today is auto. As we see above, those capitalists will oppose transitioning away from an automobile-based reliance. Overall, what is needed is the end of an economy that depends on producing ever increasing amounts of goods. But that is exactly what capitalism is based on.
- **Agriculture:** U.S. capitalist agriculture depends on ploughing the soil and using massive amounts of pesticides and chemical fertilizers and meat animals raised in feed lots. Even the US government demands this through their requirements for farmers to be eligible to receive price support subsidies. The alternative is use of non-ploughing seed drills, use of cover crops and allowing animals to graze on open fields. Among other things, this would enrich the soil and allow it to massively capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. *According to Michael Pollan ("Omnivore's Dilemma"), adoption of these methods would remove 14 billion*

pounds of carbon from the atmosphere per year.

Overall, reduction in emissions from one of these sectors is interlinked with the others. For example, reduction in manufacturing emissions cannot be accomplished without a transformation of the electricity sector. What is required is a general plan, organized, managed and controlled by the working class itself.

Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal does not deal with the specifics. Here's what it proposes:

- To understand whether this plan can succeed, we have to start with the current state of global warming/global climate change.Her plan calls for the House of Representatives to establish a super committee (called a "select committee") to develop legislation to accomplish that end. Her plan would create millions of new, well-paying jobs in the renewable energy field while phasing out all use of fossil fuel. She explains that a massive of investment is necessary to really kick-start the industry, which means that simple tax incentives for private business is insufficient. As she puts it, "the level of investment required will be massive."
- Her plan proposes that the government could raise the money through "traditional debt tools" (i.e. federal deficit spending) as well as creating new public banks. She also calls for "the government to take an equity role in projects." In other words, public/private partnerships.
- The select committee would "act as a quarterback in working through and resolving any comments or issues brought up by the other House Committees."

The Fifth Report of the main scientific international panel on climate change – the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – explains how great the danger is: As the extreme cold in the Midwest United States this winter (2019) shows, what we're really facing is global climate disruption – extreme cold in some areas, heat in others; flooding in some areas, drought in others. Overall, as the Earth warms, though, this warming will tend to feedback on itself. For example, as the tundra in the North thaws, it releases the greenhouse gas methane, which then causes even more warming.

Despite this, all the IPCC report raises are very moderate changes, such as only reducing industrial output of greenhouse gas by 25% by 2050.

An article in the *Guardian* newspaper reveals the reason: They write that to reduce carbon pollution to down to zero by 2050, "would require (fuel) prices that are three to four times higher than for a 2C target." There is no chance whatsoever that there would be popular support for such price increases. Surely, the Yellow Vest movement in France has proven that.

To its credit, Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal proposal does not call for workers having to pay. She proposes basically two steps:

1. First is government financing of private investment through increase in public debt. In effect, this is a return to Keynesian economics. The Keynesian strategy died in the United States under threat of runaway inflation in the late 1970s. This signaled a new world situation. It means that Keynesianism cannot be raised from the dead.
2. The second aspect of her proposal is for "government to take an equity role in projects." This means public-private partnerships. In the past, this has always amounted to the government putting up tax dollars for a company controlled by private investors.

Even on its own terms, without considering the necessity of transforming the profit-addicted and anarchic "free" market-based economy, the Green New Deal cannot be accomplished through Ocasio-Cortez's party, the Democratic Party. Here's why:

One alternative would be to try to make the working class pay for it, as has French President Macron. We see the results there! Workers simply cannot afford to do so.

The other is to make the capitalists pay, but they will never give up their profits voluntarily. Even more important, the entire issue of global climate disruption directly leads to the issue of the "free" market and production for profit in a planless economic system. To quote R2D2, "danger, danger!" How can the capitalist-controlled Democratic Party ever push through a Green New Deal, given these political realities?

And so, the issue of preventing an all-out climate disaster is political, not scientific. That is the lens through which we must look at Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal.

FDR's New Deal

For starters, what was the original "New Deal"? First coined by FDR, it was nothing but a "happy phrase… (that) made people feel better" as Art Preis quoted FDR's own Labor Secretary Frances Perkins in his (Preis's) classic U.S. labor history, *Labor's Giant Step*. Similar to the bank bailout after the 2008 collapse, Preis explains that FDR's first step was to bailout the big banks at the expense of the depositors and the small banks. Whereas by 1945 FDR was spending over $100 billion per year on war, his "Emergency Relief Act" spent only 0.5% of that amount ($500 million) on jobs, and jobs at a pittance as far as wages were concerned. In fact, FDR's New Deal did little to nothing to relieve unemployment; it was the coming of World War II that lifted the U.S. economy out of Depression, and what a cost that was.

It is no accident that from Van Jones to Ocasio-Cortez, the "solution" to climate disaster is phrased in the tradition of FDR's New Deal, nor that this proposal comes from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

An alignment of forces similar to in FDR's time is backing Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal. The reform wing of the Democrats – the "Justice Democrats" (who were the ones who recruited Ocasio-Cortez to run in the first place) show this. Those they thank for endorsing Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal include long time mainstream Democrats (like Jim McGovern and Dutch Ruppersburger) and establishment liberals (like Jackie Speier and Ro Khanna). These representatives all get donations from major corporations like Yahoo, Google and Facebook. (For some examples, see the appendix at the end of this article.) And as for the union donations, they are arranged through the union bureaucracy, which will ensure that she does not move away from the Democratic Party.

The “Justice Democrats”, who recruited Ocasio-Cortez to run for office, thanks the backers of the Green New Deal. They know full well that it won’t pass.

Fate of “Select Committee”

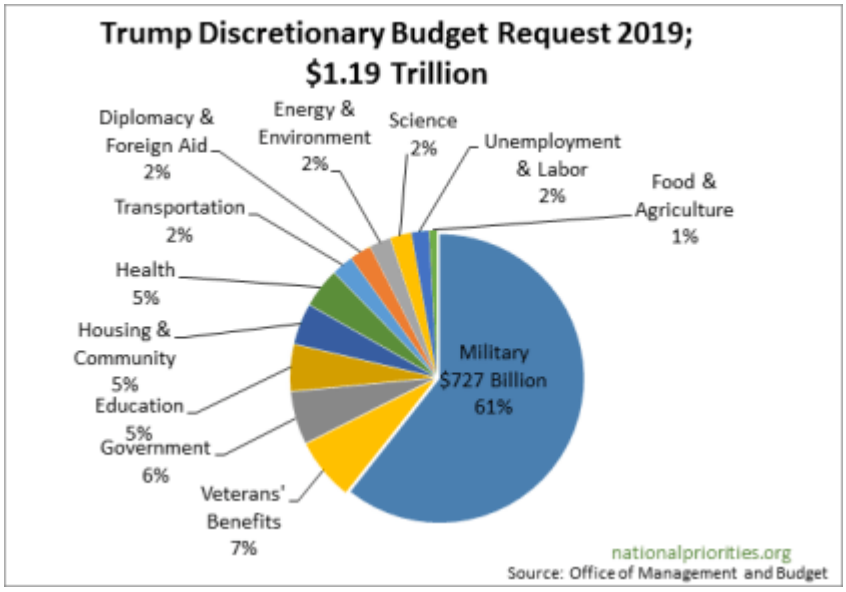
Central to Ocasio-Cortez’s strategy is the proposal of a “Select Committee” that would act as a “quarterback” as she puts it. This committee would centralize and coordinate all the legislation aimed at eliminating the use of fossil fuel by 2020.

Initially, nearly the entire “Progressive Caucus” of the House Democrats opposed the formation of this Select Committee.

If Pelosi outright refused to create this committee, she risked completely alienating the newly active young voters who put the likes of Ocasio-Cortez into office. However, she could not oppose the wishes of the real powers-that-be in the party (which include herself!) Her solution stands as a symbol of what the Democratic Party represents: She established this committee, but without the power to subpoena witnesses and without the power to propose legislation. In other words, this

compromise represents the drawing in of the impatient and agitated mainly middle-class youth, represented by the Sanders/Ocasio-Cortez/Tlaib insurgents, with the more established liberals like Jackie Speier (D-CA) and the even more mainstream Democrats like McGovern, Khanna and Ruppersberger – 40 House Democrats in all.

Corbin Trent, spokesperson for Ocasio-Cortez commented that on this basis this committee is "about as useful as a screen door on a submarine." He is wrong, however. It is enormously useful. It creates the illusion of change without really doing anything.



Military Spending

There is also a glaring absence in the Green New Deal proposal: There is no discussion as far as shifting budget priorities. Most particularly, there is the $716 billion in the 2019 budget slated for the military. This is nearly ¼ of the total federal budget for 2019. Many of these mainstream liberals would strongly oppose any significant reduction of this part of the budget, but as long as the U.S. spends that sort of money on war, it's hard to see how there is room for any other sort of priority.

Natural Gas

The history of the Democratic Party in relation to fracking and natural gas development is central to understanding the orientation of that party in general. This history is intimately tied in with the recent history of the Democratic Party in the State of Colorado. There, a group of four multi-millionaires, known as the "Gang of Four," organized to take back power in the state from the Republicans. They were connected with the oil and gas industry in the state, and they were so successful that the Democratic Party nationally formed an equivalent group of multi-millionaires called the Democracy Alliance.) Basically, it is the story of how the use of natural gas came to be the Democrats' fallback position on energy development.

This history is intimately tied in with the recent history of the Democratic Party in the State of Colorado. The mineral extraction interests have always been central to that state's political and economic history. The power of that sector has not waned. In 2018, the *Denver Post* carried an exhaustive series of articles on how the Democrats retook power from the Republicans in that state. Those articles, available here, are well worth reading in and of themselves. What happened was that a group of four millionaires, later branded as the Gang of Four, were unhappy about the Republicans' reactionary social/cultural agenda. They got together in 2002-3 to plan to retake power

in the state. By 2005, they had created a “Democracy Alliance” which according to the *Denver Post* article was “a secretive collection of approximately 100 of the wealthiest Democrats in the nation and with a requirement of at least $1 million expenditure per year.”

This “Democracy Alliance” linked up with some of the major environmental NGOs such as the Sierra Club, whose “Beyond Coal” campaign then morphed into a campaign for “low carbon substitutes” and “clean fuels and renewables.” These and similar terms have become dog-whistles for natural gas. In 2006, the Democracy Alliance secured the election of a Democratic governor, and in 2010 that governor was replaced by the out-and-out oil representative, John Hickenlooper, Democrat.

Natural gas has been branded as the “bridge fuel” by the industry and their Democratic Party representatives. This implies that it is a bridge to transitioning to renewable fuels. In fact, it is the opposite. That’s because, by cheapening the use of fossil fuels, it has discouraged investing in renewables.

In the 2018 elections, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper was replaced by Jared Polis, one of the members of the Gang of Four in that state. A truly slimy character, Polis made his first millions speculating on the privatizing of the state monopolies in the former Soviet Union. He made something of a public reputation in Colorado after he got involved in the opposition to fracking…when the gas industry moved to frack some gas wells right near his multi-million dollar vacation home in Weld County, CO. A case of a NIMBY if there ever was one! However, his turnaround was rapid and he became known as a sell-out by the “fractivists.”

Despite this history, Bernie Sanders spent several days touring Colorado prior to the 2018 elections, campaigning for Polis.

In 2012 the Obama administration made dependency on natural gas the semi-official policy of the Democratic Party. They issued a report on the need for "clean energy". That term is often linked with the call for "energy independence" and taken together they mean nothing but the increased use of natural gas. That use is inescapably linked with increased fracking, which is massively environmental destructive. For example, fracking is linked with damage to the development of the brain and the immune system in young children. Also, due to the release of methane gas in this process, fracking may be even worse than coal as far as global warming is concerned!

Some could argue that the union leadership and the non-profits, upon which Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal relies also, will push the Democrats to the left. Will they? The political program of organized labor is completely controlled by its leadership, who represent the Democratic Party from start to finish. And the non-profits are not much different. For example, the AFL-CIO supported the Keystone XL Pipeline, while the major environmental nonprofits and groups like the millionaire's club the Democracy Alliance, are linked with the major environmental non-profits.

The conclusion is inescapable: What Ocasio-Cortez proposes will be inadequate compared to what is needed to prevent climate catastrophe. Even the limited steps she proposes cannot be accomplished through the Democratic Party, not even with the "pressure" of the leadership of the unions and the environmental NGO's, upon which she and her proposals rely.

Potential Solutions
There are potential solutions, as explained in the outline at the start of this article regarding electric generation, transportation, manufacturing and agriculture.

Nothing less than the complete socialist transformation of society is necessary. Bernie Sanders and his liberal wing of the Democratic Party often point to the Scandinavian countries as an example of socialism. Proof that these countries are no solution lies in the fact that both Denmark and Norway rely on oil production for a major portion of their economies! No, what socialism means is taking the commanding heights of the economy out of private hands and planning production under the democratic control and management of the working class itself. This cannot be accomplished through the present capitalist-controlled state. In fact, the "Founding Fathers" drew up the U.S. Constitution in order to structure the government in such a way as to prevent the working class from controlling it. What is necessary is a new form of government that can arise in the course of the struggle of workers themselves.

Reformists and liberals will claim that this means an "all-or-nothing" approach. They call this "letting the perfect be the enemy of the good." That is nonsense. If we are not clear on the necessary destination of the journey, then we will inevitably be led down one cul-de-sac, one dead-end road after another. We do, of course, also have to be clear on how to start.

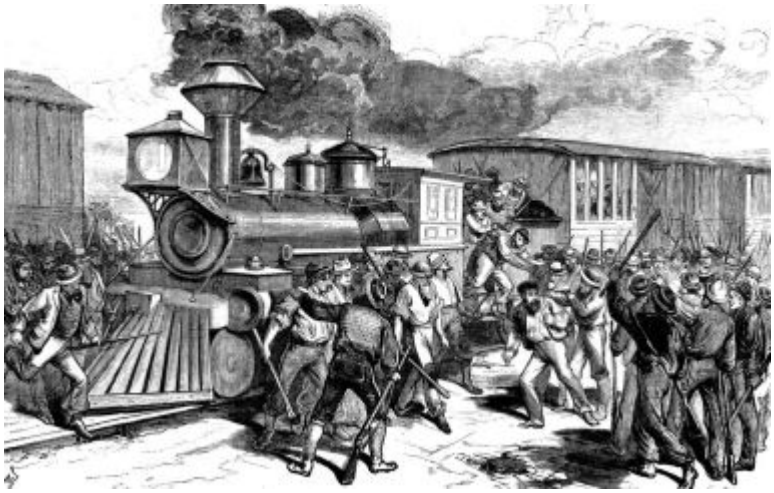
Working Class Party
In 1886, Karl Marx's co-thinker Frederick Engels wrote "The first great step of importance for every country… is always the organization of workers as an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers' party…. The masses must have time and opportunity to develop and they can only have the opportunity when they have their own movement — no matter in what form so long as it is only *their own* movement…" The same applies today.

Bernie Sanders
The entire political basis of the Green New Deal, as outlined here, shows that this plan is inextricably linked to the capitalist class and its representatives; it cannot provide a start towards building a movement of, by and for the working class. The central figure of the "progressive" wing of the Democratic Party, Bernie Sanders, is a perfect example:

- According to Craig Unger's book *House of Trump, House of Putin*, the chief campaign strategist for Sanders' 2016 presidential bid, Tad Devine, was formerly employed by none other than Paul Manafort and his infamous "Torturers' Lobby."
- The rest of his top staff, including Michael Briggs, Michaeleen Crowell, Jeff Weaver, Phil Fiermonte, Scott Goldstein and others are all Democratic Party operatives.
- Sanders' entire political history has been based on an electoral and legislative alliance with the Democratic Party leadership.

As Sanders' support for multi-millionaire Jared Polis in Colorado shows, nothing has changed since

then. Sanders will not and cannot lead a break from the Democratic Party and lead in developing a working class party. He, and others like him including Ocasio-Cortez, may break from the Democrats *after* a working class alternative is already well under way, but that leaves us with the question: *"How can that alternative be started?"*



U.S. Working Class Tradition of Struggle

From the Great Uprising of 1877 to the West Virginia teachers strike of 2018, the U.S. working class has a tradition of moving first by striking and otherwise mobilizing in the streets and at the work places. There is every reason to think that tradition will continue, despite the fact that the liberal/"progressive" wing of the Democrats is constantly trying to divert the working class into electoral and legislative support for them, and despite the fact that the leaders of the working class – the union leadership – represent these Democrats and are complicit in this attempt.

We might look to the French Yellow Vest movement for an example of what could happen here. There had been a series of strikes over the summer of 2018 in France. Similar to here, the union leadership there did everything in their power to limit the scope of these strikes. They successfully prevented these strikes from becoming the springboard to a wider working class movement against the attacks on French workers' living standards – what is known as "austerity measures." Here, we have seen a similar trend, first and foremost in the teachers strikes from West Virginia to Los Angeles. As in France, the union leadership here were unwilling to build these strikes into a movement for higher wages for all and for a restoration of all the cuts in all government services. Similarly, the union leadership was more or less passive in the face of the federal shutdown, and what little they did do failed to link the issue of federal workers' pay with the defense of immigrant workers, including asylum seekers. The leadership of the only nominally socialist group with any real presence – the Democratic Socialists of America – was equally complicit.

Dam Will Burst
Sooner or later, though, something will happen for the dam to burst, for a more generalized movement to develop in the streets. It may be some political crisis, including a possible international crisis such as a U.S. military assault on Iran, or a particularly egregious case of police violence and racism on a scale not seen up until now or an environmental disaster far greater than anything we've seen up until now. It could be voter suppression on a scale unseen since the days of Jim Crow. Or it could even be some "accidental" event that just strikes a raw nerve. But whatever it is, it is hard to see how the present period of tense calm can last very much longer. When that calm shatters, then all hell will break loose. That could even lead to the calling out of the National Guard in cities throughout the United States.

Workers' Movement Will be Coordinated
Whatever happens, however it happens, a renewed mobilization of the U.S. working class will be the basis for the beginnings of the formation of a mass working class party in the United States. The tendency to organize and coordinate that mobilization on a national scale – in fact possibly even internationally – can develop. What will be necessary will be a democratic organizational structure. In fact, it can only be through such a clear structure that real democracy can exist. Without representatives and a leadership elected on the basis of what they stand for, then inevitably the decisions will be made behind the scenes by a small, unelected group. (That is exactly what happened in Occupy Oakland.)

But what is such an organizational structure but the beginnings of a working class party? Not a party born through some academic-like "plan" but one born through the actual real-life struggles of hundreds of thousands, possibly of millions of workers and youth in the school of life. In time, and maybe a fairly short period of time, that working class party in the making will have to determine its orientation towards elections, even though it might not be born through participating in elections. Supporting the "left" leaning Democrats would be the death of this working class party in the making. Ignoring elections would have the same effect, since it would cede the ground to the Democrats. It would have to run its own candidates, maybe first at the local level.

It is in this unplanned, chaotic, tumultuous and even violent road that the solution to the global climate crisis is to be found.

Political Conclusions
Some argue that while a working-class party is necessary, until we have one we should support the likes of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Aside from the fact that this has always been the argument of those who in reality are trying to avoid building a working class alternative to the Democratic Party, this argument leads us down a dead-end street. Support for this wing of the Democrats has always led to adopting their methods. Those methods can be most clearly seen in the response to the 2019 federal government shutdown. All Sanders could do was propose sending a letter of protest to Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell. In fact, what was needed was mass protests at federal offices and at airports around the country – protests that linked the nonpayment of 800,000 federal workers with the recent raise that all federal workers were supposed to get but that Trump vetoed and the need for a substantial raise for all workers. This should have been linked with opposition to the Wall and the demand for release of all asylum seekers. Instead, aside from a few small protests at a few airports, the union leadership was passive. Following their lead, so was the only socialist group which has any influence, Democratic Socialists of America.

Instead of orienting to the "progressive" Democrats and adopting their methods, we should take the following approach:

- As every new issue arises, we have to be sure not to be passive again.

- Build the mobilization of workers and working-class young people in the streets and working class communities and schools.
- Help rank and file union members build opposition caucuses inside their unions.
- Support and help widen strikes and other actions of workers.
- Within all of this, help to clarify what capitalism has in store for our planet and how only the working class, through its conscious and independent activity, can avert the looming capitalist disaster.

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