Building a Movement for Climate Justice

written by Phil Gasper | January 24, 2023

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Phil Gasper: Well, thanks so much for agreeing to do this interview. I wanted to start with the current climate crisis. The Washington Post *recently called the climate news "grim" and there's been a lot of focus on what has changed in the last 12 months and in the last few years, since the Paris Agreement several years ago, and since COP 26 in 2021. As we're talking, we're waiting for COP 27 to start later this month. But even some of the people who had been optimistic in the past about what's taking place at the international level seem to be less so now, because the gap between where we are and where we need to be seems to be so big, and governments certainly are not living up to the pledges which they've made in the past.*

Alyssa Battistoni: I think you're right. Last year's COP 26 in some ways felt like a big disappointment, or underwhelming in some way, because after the Paris agreement and then the drama around Trump pulling out, there was some hope that with a non-Trump President, the United States might be involved in a different way. But I think that in many ways, it shouldn't be surprising, insofar as the COPs have never really been where the forefront of climate action is happening. I think they're important as a place where governments are making commitments that climate activists can use to hold governments accountable, and to point to exactly to that gap you just described, between what we need to do, with what governments have committed to do, and then what they have actually done. All of those things are important. It is also the one annual time when everyone talks about climate change for a week, so it creates some global attention for protests and so on. But I think that's just not been where the political energy is coming from. And so, in some ways the kind of disappointments are not surprising.

One thing that is interesting in this moment is that even as there's perhaps a growing disenchantment with some of these processes, a number of liberal climate commentators are probably more optimistic because they think green capitalism is finally moving into gear. There's been this surge of interest in ESG investing—in environmental, social governance investing—which is supposedly a green investment. Here in the U.S., we've seen the passage of the IRA [Inflation Reduction Act], which amounts to state-driven investments in green capital. We can talk about the deep inadequacies of those—I think ESG in particular is just greenwashing—but there's a mood amongst some people that, OK, finally green capitalism is shifting into gear and that will solve this

problem. I think that is wildly over-optimistic. But it's interesting to see the different directions that climate opinion is moving after a very bleak point last fall. On the one hand, it seems that very few people think we're now going to stop at 1.5 degrees (ºC) of warming—I think *The Economist* just had a cover on this[1]—but [they say] it's fine, [because] we're also not going to hit five degrees. We'll probably hit somewhere in between, maybe it stops at three—which is absolutely catastrophic! But because the very upper bounds of temperature rise seem more unlikely, for some people that seems to be a sign of optimism. I think that's a very low bar for what we're taking as signs of optimism.

In any case, it'll be interesting seeing what happens at COP 27. I don't expect that much to come out of COP 27, to be honest. One thing I want to keep an eye on is how the loss and damage framework moves, because there have been some interesting developments and that has gained greater prominence as a version of what we might call climate reparations. And so, whether that can gain more traction this year could be interesting. But I think the expectations are lower and that seems good to me.

PG: You mentioned The Economist *saying goodbye to 1.5 degrees. That target came out of the Paris Agreement in 2015—the recognition that 1.5 degrees was what the goal should be. Previously it had been 2 degrees. Now it looks like there's slippage on that. It becomes an aspiration rather than a real target. What's the difference between 1.5 and 2 degrees of warming? How much worse would hitting 2 degrees make the crisis that we're facing?*

AB: I don't have these numbers off the top of my head, but I would say it is very significant. There is a reason why a number of developing countries have made the slogan "1.5 to stay alive," because any more warming will have quite serious repercussions. And that seems all the more true the more we learn about climate sensitivity:we are already seeing more severe impacts at a lower degree of warming than were anticipated. We're already at 1.1 now and we're seeing the kinds of impacts that we would expect at a higher level of warming. So that suggests that the lower end actually is very important and that the gap between 1.5 and 2 might be even more significant than we think, particularly when you take into account things like feedback loops.

PG: So, it's a big deal. And three degrees would not just be an incremental change in what the consequences will be. It takes the danger into a new level of magnitude—the number of people who are going to die and the wider effects on the ecosphere. Earlier you mentioned the strangely-named Inflation Reduction Act, which was actually largely a climate bill. That was supposedly the big achievement of the Biden administration this year with respect to climate issues. Could you talk a little bit about that? At the time when it was passed, there was a lot of trumpeting about how this was the most money that the United States had ever committed to dealing with the climate issue—which is true, but it's still tiny in terms of what needs to be done and is arguably being spent in the wrong kinds of ways as well.

AB: It is the most money spent and yet it is pretty low. The bar is very low for climate policy. There hasn't really been any significant climate policy at the federal level in the United States, so just doing anything at all makes it the biggest climate bill ever. The IRA provides about $370 billion in investments for various policies, most of which are some form of either subsidies for green manufacturing or tax credits on electric vehicles, things like that. It's much bigger, for example, than the Obama administration stimulus, which put around $90 billion into solar research and development—and that actually did help grow the U.S. solar sector, and brought down the cost of solar. So it had some effects. But elements of the IRA are a scaled-up version of that, with some elements of industrial policy- light. It is really a bill for green capital. It is oriented towards jump-starting private industries and supporting mostly better-off green consumers—people who can afford to buy a new electric car or renovate their homes. There are some subsidies for used vehicles, or for people who own their home and want to put solar panels on the roof, things like that. That's better

than not doing anything, but it's a really far cry from what I think a lot of climate advocates in the United States were hoping for. It is certainly a long shot from, for example, the Sanders campaign proposal for $16 trillion of spending on a Green New Deal. That's a pretty big gap. It's even a lot lower than Biden's own initial Build Back Better framework, which was going to spend, counting generously, maybe $1 trillion on climate over ten years. And so the IRA is down to a third of even that.

So it's a really, really big gap quantitatively, in terms of sheer spending, but also a qualitative difference in terms of the kinds of investments. What I find most frustrating and disappointing in the IRA is the shift from the public-investment oriented framework of the Green New Deal, which was centered around building out public goods and services and infrastructures—things like public transit, potentially things like dense social housing, which could both reduce energy use, transition away from fossil fuels, and improve quality of life in ways that aso meet the needs of working people, rather than just funneling the money to green investors and hoping that the goods will eventually trickle down. Maybe you can buy a cheaper EV in ten years or so. So, it really is a really big gap [between] those two visions of what a green political economy looks like. The Green New Deal vision was to be doing things that would both meet immediate needs and tackle broader social issues of economic and racial inequality in the United States. The idea was to make climate an issue that is connected to people's daily lives. And the IRA is simply not doing that at all. It's not the scale, it's not the speed, it's not using the power that I think that the federal government could have to spend a lot of money and go out and do big public-works projects quickly. Instead, it's hoping the private sector will invent some things and gradually get them out to consumers, and eventually those goods will outcompete fossil fuels on the market. There's no sticks at all, right? There are only carrots for green investing. No sticks for things that we are trying to stop.

PG: No emissions targets.

AB: No emissions targets. No restrictions on fossil-fuel extraction. In fact, there are—as many people have pointed out—some concessions to the fossil-fuel industry in terms of expanding drilling permits and expediting pipeline approval, and things like that. So, there are a bunch of things in the bill that are, that are compromising with the fossil-fuel industry. Again, this is a model built around the hope that green tech will eventually out compete fossil-fuel based technology. I think that's a slower and worse way to actually cut emissions, particularly at this point. I also worry that it's not doing the political work that we would want climate politics or climate policy to do in terms of building a popular movement, a broader working-class movement, for further climate action. The IRA has a very small constituency, which is again green capital and well-off green consumers like homeowners again in contrast to the Green New Deal vision of building a broader movement around climate. So, I worry about that and what that will mean for the possibilities of doing more in the United States.

PG: Let's talk a little bit about building this broader movement. Of course, most of that is going to have to come from outside of the political establishment, even the left wing of the political establishment. But the way I look at it, a radical version of the Green New Deal—the kind that Sanders was proposing—offers a stepping stone to help build that kind of movement, because it connects the climate issue, as you said, with issues which are of concern to people in their everyday lives. And it provides the opportunity to push things much further. I mean, sometimes the left critics of the Green New Deal say the whole point of the original New Deal was to rescue capitalism during the Great Depression, which is true. But it also included a lot of reforms that most people on the left would support and we're still fighting to save. And the same thing is true of the Green New Deal. There really isn't just one Green New Deal, there are Green New Deals—or the slogan is used by a variety of different people. In some versions, it really is just about how do we use public spending to resuscitate American capitalism or global capitalism? But in other versions, you can see it as a stepping stone to doing something more radical. But to become that steppingstone, it requires the

sort of political energy that you are talking about. It's going to require connecting with movements across the United States and internationally. So, could you talk a little bit about that? Where are we in terms of building movements of that kind and what are the prospects of strengthening the environmental movement so it can start pushing things further in this direction?

AB: That's a great question and those are great points. There's been a lot of interesting debate around the Green New Deal and the left critics of the Green New Deal aren't wrong. Of course, the New Deal rescued capitalism in many ways. Even the radical vision of the Green New Deal, the one we wrote about in *A Planet to Win*, is imagined as a stepping stone or a way to build movements and hoping to start pointing beyond capitalism—but we don't claim the Green New Deal is itself going to end capitalism. I see it as a pragmatic [step]. How do we build power and movements in the near term, while also trying to bring down carbon emissions very quickly, so we have a world to continue to build anything in? I think it's okay if not everything we're doing is immediately going to destroy capitalism—that's a really daunting task that the left has not yet succeeded in achieving. So given the temporal urgency of climate change, I think we shouldn't put all of our eggs in that basket but should be thinking about how to build in that direction, [winning] non-reformist reforms, and so on.

Again, that's now where things currently stand. There was a moment of building energy around the Green New Deal, around the Sanders 2020 campaign—it was a moment of growth, the culmination of left energy from previous years, where it seemed like a lot might be possible. And there was the idea that in moments of crisis, the door might open wider. So then we had this absolutely massive public health crisis with covid—but instead of having a Sanders administration responding with the Green Deal, we have obviously seen something very different. It's been instructive because there has been a huge amount of spending on various COVID relief programs over the past couple of years—but most of it has been oriented not towards making longer-term changes but towards getting "back to normal." Biden himself is not at all on the left or a radical of any kind, but I think he is willing to move with the political winds. He came into office with the idea that "I'm going to do big spending," relative to other Democrats—he was going to have his FDR moment. That was really dramatically overstated, but he was at least proposing a bigger vision than almost anyone was expecting from Biden. He seemed to have learned some lessons from the Obama administration's massively failed stimulus program. What I find sobering about that, then, is that there was some evidence that even somebody like Joe Biden—who is as much a creature of the Democratic Party as they come—was in some way responding to left movement momentum. And yet we ended up very, very far from that.

The dynamic we have currently in the United States is that the left has grown a lot; the climate movement has grown a lot; and the Green New Deal really did shift the political arguments that were happening around the climate movement. There were some important coalitions beginning to be built. But what the sweep from 2018, 2019 and rise of the Green New Deal to passing of the IRA in 2022 has shown is that the left has the ability to put ideas out, to have discussion about them, to build some energy around them—but we don't have the power to deliver on them. When it comes down to it, the IRA was mostly an in-house deal—Chuck Schumer and Joe Manchin hammering things out with a lot of input from green investors who are very interested in having some state funds to help get their businesses off the ground. So that's telling and it is not very encouraging.

It has been tough to build a genuinely powerful and durable climate movement in a way that can put pressure on the politicians who are making these decisions. I think we have a lot of good ideas about how to do that, including building more relationships between the climate and labor movements. Obviously, people have been arguing for an environment-labor coalition for a long time, but it's just very difficult to realize in practice. There's a chicken and egg problem. You have to have a lot of labor support to get some kind of big green jobs type program, or green transition or just transition program. But it's going to always be hard to get that support if you're talking about shutting down

fossil fuel industries and routing people into different kinds of jobs, because people have legitimate worries about whether we're actually going to be able to deliver on the just transition element of creating green jobs that are as good as jobs people have now. These are all pretty well-known issues, and it's been very difficult to make progress.

Alyssa Battistoni

PG: I want to pick up on two points. A couple of years ago, Verso published a little book called Levers of Power.[2] *It's quite a good discussion of what it takes to win left-wing reforms when you're up against vested interests. One of the issues it looks at is healthcare and how healthcare reforms have been won. And it's always the case that you're dealing with political obstacles, but you're also dealing with entrenched economic interests—in this case the healthcare industry, committed to private ownership and a for-profit healthcare system. It's even bigger in the case of climate because we're dealing with the fossil fuel industry, which is possibly the biggest, most powerful industry, and connected very closely with various other areas, like the auto industry and construction and so on. But anyway,* Levers of Power *makes the argument that we win when we can raise the costs so high that it's better for them to make the concession, because it will cost them more if they don't. So that requires building movements which can actually raise the costs for them. And that's proven hard. We've barely made any progress in terms of healthcare. We're a long way from Medicare for All. But that same framework applies here as well. So, the question is how do we raise the costs so that we can force them to concede to the kinds of changes that we so desperately need? So that's one point. I also wanted to connect back to labor and the environmental movement, because very often you raise the costs by disruptive mass protests, by strikes, sometimes by sit-ins and occupations of workplaces. That was crucial in the 1930s when the original New Deal was won. You mentioned the difficulties of building that kind of alliance. But how do we go about doing that? Because it does seem that we need the organized working class to be part of a movement that can actually win dramatic changes.*

AB: I haven't read the book, but I agree with all of that. I think there are a couple of things that are tricky about climate movements. One strain of climate movement activity, for example, was aiming to raise the costs around fossil fuel infrastructure. A lot of the anti-pipeline movements and anti-fossil-fuel infrastructure movements were effectively doing a version of that—trying to make it very challenging, difficult, and quite literally costly, in terms of delays, to build fossil fuel infrastructure and to shut things down in that sense. It's not a strike per se, but it's certainly an interruption to the business of different kinds of fossil fuel industry activities in terms of being able to move products. So, I think there's a way that some of those actions actually do function in a similar way to the

traditional strike, with some important differences. And that model has had certainly a lot of success in blocking the construction of certain pieces of infrastructure—the Keystone pipeline most obviously[3]—but also in bringing climate change to public attention, raising awareness, and so on.

What's more challenging has been the more constructive element that things like the Green New Deal are imagining—how we not only stop the fossil-fuel, carbon-intensive infrastructure, but how we also remake existing infrastructure, jobs, built environments, to be low-carbon. There the call is for green jobs that don't exist yet—and it's hard to shut down the factory that does exist to demand the one that doesn't exist. That's a very intense kind of action to take, a very high bar—shutting down production and demanding that your entire job or workplace be transitioned into something else. It's a really different kind of demand than I think we usually see labor movements making with things like strikes and occupations and all of these kinds of familiar tactics within the context of traditional labor campaigns. So there's something that's distinctive about what we would want a climate-labor alliance to do that is genuinely challenging.

One of the things that might be positive about the IRA is that, even if it is mostly spending on green subsidies and tax credits and so on, there will eventually be some green jobs that are created down the road. It will be interesting to see whether and how unions in those sectors are able to become a force and exert power. There will potentially be labor-capital struggles in those sectors and industries if they can be organized. There are challenges there because a lot of green, renewable energy is much less unionized than fossil fuels like coal, which is very heavily unionized. Electric vehicle production is less labor-intensive than conventional auto manufacturing. So, there are going to be real challenges for what some of these labor struggles looks like. But I can at least imagine some exciting labor politics happening down the road.

To return to the question of raising costs, there are real challenges in figuring out how to build a mass movement that can do costly disruption. You see some of this in movements like Extinction Rebellion, which are trying to shut down daily life—but often without great political analysis or demands.

PG: I think you're right about groups like Extinction Rebellion. They demonstrate the energy, and the desperation, in a way, that a lot of people feel. but they're still groping for a political strategy that can not just shut down a city center for a few hours but help build a political movement that can lead to much bigger changes. In terms of building an alliance with the labor movement, there's one model that I know a little bit about. In Britain there has been a One Million Climate Jobs campaign for several years that many of the big unions have signed onto.[4] So, at least in terms of political statements, they're on board with a transition. Now that hasn't translated into policy or real shifts in the way that the economy is organized, but it has enabled the beginnings of a kind of environmental-labor coalition to emerge. And last year at COP 26 in Glasgow, many unions were there on the big march. I think it was led by union banners. That's one model of doing this, and there are similar campaigns in other countries. Could we do the same in the United States?

AB: That's a really interesting model and something similar is possible in the United States. The Green New Deal framework has really tried to put green jobs at the center of climate politics: for example, the Sunrise sit-ins in November 2018 had signs calling for a Green New Deal and "Green Jobs For All."[5] Those were the big demands because I think they rightly realized, and I think the climate movement more broadly has realized, that labor has to be part of the climate movement if we're going to get anywhere. Climate movements have to be connected to both climate justice movements and to labor. So, I think that green jobs were definitely, at least rhetorically, part of the climate program—albeit less with the kind of target you're describing, which seems really important. Because then we saw the green jobs language taken up by Biden, "When I think about climate, I think about jobs." It was not necessarily entirely co-opted, because politicians will take up movement

language and they don't suddenly own that language. But certainly it has been something that Biden talks about with the IRA: "We're creating jobs." The IRA itself is not directly creating jobs, however. It is more like, "Well, jobs will be created somewhere." And so, I think having a demand [that's] ambitious but reasonable and also concrete, would be a great thing to be able to rally around and keep in the public eye.

Again, the really tough question is just getting from the demand to realizing it. Obviously that's a hard thing. But we have had [groups like] the BlueGreen Alliance[6] and the Labor Network for Sustainability[7] operating along different points in the spectrum of labor-climate alliance for years. It's been possible to get a number of unions to sign on to climate resolutions and visions, and things like that. But putting things at risk, or using member power to try to win things,is a lot higher bar and is tougher. Those caveats aside, I do think something like what you're describing seems like an important step in going from a nebulous conception of green jobs to more concrete demand that we can see movements using, talking about, organizing around,

PG: With demands for public spending to actually create these jobs.

AB: Yes.

PG: One of the debates on the left of the environmental movement in the last few years has been between advocates of degrowth and supporters of the Green New Deal—at least sometimes that's the way it's posed, that these are two different visions. The Green New Deal is supposedly committed to continued expansion of the economy. Degrowthers emphasize the need to end the endless cycle of growth and use of limited resources, and so on. Now, my view is that there's got to be a way to meld both of these approaches. We need degrowth in terms of using limited resources that can go along with increased quality of life for the vast majority of the population. And a Green New Deal could be part of the process of shifting us in that direction. So, I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts on that debate.

AB: When my coauthors and I wrote about the vision of a radical Green New Deal in *A Planet to Win*, we didn't talk about it in terms of degrowth per se, and we actually tried to remain agnostic on growth/degrowth as a debate. My main concern with the debate is I think people tend to talk past each other a lot and get stuck on the language or definitions of growth. But I think certainly what we were envisioning is compatible with what a lot of degrowth advocates talk about in terms of reducing resource use and resource throughput while increasing quality of life, standard of living, well-being, welfare, all of these kinds of things. And I think there are many ways to do that with less resource use. In fact, I think the United States is a great example of high resource use for a low standard of living for a lot of people. If you're sitting in traffic for hours to get to work or spending a ton of money on gas, especially now, that's not like "Wow, that's really living the dream," because you can't go anywhere without a car. There are so many versions of this that I think you can see in the United States. There's certainly no reason to increase resource use for their own sake.

The other thing that I find challenging about the degrowth debate is that it sometimes seems to me to be a euphemism for talking about capitalism, which is not going to degrow. It's [not] going to degrow in terms of value accumulation and capital accumulation, that process won't stop, but also I see no convincing evidence that decoupling is possible—that you can continue to grow the economy but decrease resource use. You can have decreased resource *intensity* or get more per unit of fossil fuel—that I think is plausible. But in terms of absolute resource-use decline, I think there's no real evidence to support that. So, I think you do have to talk about capitalism as well, and obviously a lot of degrowth people do—but sometimes the debate about growth/degrowth seems to avoid the elephant in the room.

PG: Which is capitalism.

AB: Yeah, exactly. Capitalism is often the elephant in the room of climate debates more generally. Again, the Green New Deal is not itself a program to end capitalism, but it is hoping to do some of that work of trying to move towards less resource-intensive, better, or more "good for people" forms of life, while also trying to build power to [address] this bigger problem.

PG: Exactly. So, you have a chapter in your book on internationalism. And obviously that's a huge dimension of the challenge that we're facing because this isn't just a problem in the United States or in wealthy countries, it's a global issue. So, that on the one hand, means the challenge is even bigger, because we need a movement that is not just going to change things here, but change things in every other country. But it also opens up some possibilities for international solidarity and building movements across borders. Can you talk a little bit about that aspect of it and how you think internationalism comes in here? And let me add one other point as well. At the top, in terms of governmental relations, we definitely are moving in the wrong direction, with U.S.-China competition and a new cold war (if that's the appropriate term), which makes it even more difficult to come to international agreements that will deal fairly with the problem. With that in the background, what kind of internationalism do you see as a way forward to deal with the climate crisis?

AB: We absolutely do need internationalism, there's no getting around it. In the book we tried to talk about some of the political challenges—what are the institutions, what are the ways to actually build internationalism? In an earlier moment you had the Communist Party and other internationalist formations. There are still internationalist labor unions. But I think there were, in previous moments, more internationalist *structures*, and the lack of those is a genuine problem for contemporary left movements.

So in the book we talk about supply chains as being one way to build those connections: from the point of extraction—in the book we talk about lithium extraction in Chile—to say the Tesla factory in California where workers are making electric vehicles, these are all workers and communities living in the extractive zones who are connected by this one particular supply-chain link. This is a way to think about how that organizing could begin to happen across labor and community struggles

A lot of the movements against fossil fuel infrastructure, a lot of particularly indigenous led [movements], are also engaged in international discussions learning from different tactics and movements. A lot of those movements are themselves plurinational, insofar as they're involving people of different indigenous nations—so there are forms of internationalism there too. The anti-extractive movement more generally is fairly internationalist, not as a fully coordinated organization, but a network of people learning from different kinds of struggles in different places. So those are also some interesting possibilities.

Even with the Green New Deal, I was pleasantly surprised by how many people from other parts of the world were interested in talking about these ideas and trying to develop similar ideas or programs or movements within their own contexts. I was surprised because the New Deal is such an American-centric framework—not that the idea of doing public investment and public goods is a U.S.-specific thing, far from it—but even the rhetoric traveled further than I thought it might. Certainly, we learned a lot from, for example, movements in Brazil for public transit and housing—and those are working-class led movements for services that meet people's needs in low-carbon ways.

We'll see what comes of this, but we're in the midst of the early beginnings of a new pink tide in Latin America, and that could also be potentially an exciting place of possibility for some kinds of

green social-democracy type movements. It also seems like another place to look for potential internationalism and movements learning from each other and connecting to one another, and hopefully those of us in other parts of North America can also learn from and connect to that, though I'm not holding my breath that the United States will elect a leftist.

PG: And we can learn by example and certainly the inspiration is there. Perhaps this is a good place for us to stop. We don't have the institutions on an international level that the left can use. But there's a lot more communication now. And I think some of this can grow if people learn the lessons. As always, nobody is going to come and save us, we have to do it ourselves. It will depend on whether movements on the ground can be built. And I think that's true in Latin America, too. It's great to see the back of Bolsonaro, but Lula is not going to do it for the people of Brazil or the people of Latin America without a massive grassroots movement as well. So, let's hope we're moving in that direction.

AB: I absolutely agree with that. I'm looking forward to seeing what develops and I'm sure we'll have a lot to learn one way or another. It's only a start, but at least it's a start.

Notes

1. "Say Goodbye to 1.5°C," *The Economist*, November 5, 2022.

2. Kevin A. Young, Tarun Banerjee and Michael Schwartz, *Levers of Power: How the 1% Rules and What the 99% Can Do About It* (New York: Verso 2020).

3. The Keystone XL pipeline was designed to transport tar-sands oil from Canada to refineries on the Gulf Coast of Texas. After a decade of protests by indigenous groups and climate activists, and protracted legal battles, the pipeline was finally denied a permit by the Biden administration. See Melissa Denchak and Courtney Lindwall, "What Is the Keystone XL Pipeline?", Natural Resources Defense Council, March 15, 2022.

4. Campaign Against Climate Change.

5. "Backed by Ocasio-Cortez, Youth Climate Activists Arrested at Pelosi's Office Demanding Democrats Embrace 'Green New Deal'," *Common Dreams*, November 13, 2018.

6. "The BlueGreen Alliance unites labor unions and environmental organizations to solve today's environmental challenges in ways that create and maintain quality jobs and build a clean, thriving, and equitable economy." Bluegreen Alliance, "About Us."

7. "We're building a powerful labor-climate movement to secure an ecologically sustainable and economically just future—from the ground up." Labor Network for Sustainability.