

What Do Eco-Socialists Have to Say About the Climate Movement?

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To me the role of eco-socialists is to raise transitional demands, demands that bring a broader understanding of the role of capital in creating climate change and the ways that capitalism can be challenged by working people and people most affected by the vast inequality it has created.

Two criteria seem pertinent to me:

1) How do we articulate what it will actually take to save our planet for the humans and other species? That will require a deep transformation that will include locking out at least the fossil fuel and auxiliary corporations and economy, ending wars and militarization of society, taking up a race- and gender-based liberation politics, and creating a thoroughly transforming social-service safety net that expands human development and allows people to look at the whole of society and our planet and make responsible decisions. Without that transformation, certain sectors—by job, by race, by gender, by class, by region—will continue to exert uneven and inadequate pressure on climate-based decisions.

2) How do we create mass movements, often united fronts of a wide range of people and social-political sectors, that can join together to exert power to make real change? How do we articulate demands that can bring the movements together while keeping those demands just a bit beyond the consensus, prodding the movement forward? How do we engage people in a mass-based struggle so that we begin the process of gaining the kind of power needed for the transformation described above?

I have spent much of my political life working in united fronts, organizational expressions of movements, coalitions, and so on, that put forward mass demands that raise consciousness, build power through the movements, and actually create some of the changes we need, not-quite-adequate as they may often be due to movements' weakness. I have also been a leftist without too much of a "brand" or group of socialists that I have formally joined. Right now I am in Democratic Socialists of America and feel the broad politics of the organization is what keeps it active, muscular, and pushing. They are good comrades to the rest of the climate movement—willing to show up, picket,

petition, study, strategize, and to be kind and generous comrades. They are well-respected as a relatively new activist organization in New York. DSA existed for many years before Trump, but after Trump was elected the numbers have exploded—presently up to 50,000 nationally and 5,000 in New York City. Yes, DSA pushes for publically owned and operated, 100 percent renewable, energy now or as soon as possible. Yes, they call for an end to the fossil fuel regime and for a polluters tax. Outside of the “publically owned and operated” part of the demand, these are the demands that our local climate movement has adopted. It is our job as eco-socialists to support the demands of the united front—in this case the Peoples Climate Movement and New York Renews—and push the demands further, specifically toward public power or public ownership of the new renewable energy grid. We need to articulate a fuller politics than can the united front coalitions due to their organizational support and membership, especially in the unions. That “prod” is essential for direction of the coalitions and movement.

As someone who has worked in the union and climate sectors, I can testify that this is a tough row to hoe. Labor is obsessed with its survival, especially in the face of the Janus decision and shitty contracts, with minimal union density among American workers—7 percent in the private sector and 35 percent in the public sector, and steadily declining—so much so that climate issues, truly an existential threat to humans and other living things, do not register as important to unions, so they don’t engage. And a significant sector of labor is busy defending fossil fuel and auxiliary workers: It twists the arms of the rest of the climate movement till it stops saying the words “fossil fuels.” And yet, if we don’t have the labor movement or some section of the labor movement involved, we won’t have a watchdog for good jobs, we won’t have the legitimacy among working-class people to actually be able to deliver. Unions are at their weakest point since World War II, but they still have more direct power—in politics, in public opinion, in crafting policies—than any other sector besides capital and the Republican and Democratic parties. So we cannot leave labor out of the movement—we need them. And while the rank and file members of many unions are truly further left and have much more radical climate politics than their leadership, so far the organizational and political articulation of those rank and file activists is small, if significant, and needs to be nurtured.

Climate justice activists—racially oppressed and economically marginalized people—have a directly critical view of capitalism and articulate the need to challenge racism and inequality as a motor force behind the climate movement. They seek both a regenerative economy and energy democracy. They often focus on local solutions that come from their direct community experiences. But their direct relationship to the hardship that capitalism, racism, and climate change have brought their communities has made their demands both radical and practical. They are the most likely sector to call for some sort of reparations, for repair and rebuilding after disasters, for jobs in whatever industries exist. In coalitions they are less likely to call for an end to capitalism or insistence on nationalization of energy. Without people from racially oppressed or economically marginalized groups, we cannot expect to either define an effective future or to win.

While I completely agree with my colleagues that we need to dramatically cut back our energy use, both personal and societal, I worry that the perfect will become the enemy of the good. The demon we must defeat is the fossil fuel industry first and foremost as well as a capitalist economy and culture based on continuous growth and over-consumption. How to stop it without evoking the “nanny state” and a scolding stance is quite frankly beyond me. Yes, it needs to be articulated, but it can’t be front and center. We must look squarely at the worst of the devils—the fossil fuel industry—and drill down.

I would also like to briefly address the issue of divestment from fossil fuels by pension funds, endowments, and others. I have been active in pressing this demand over the last three years as an entry point to engage unions and to score a “win,” which is so badly needed. The point behind divestment is to make fossil fuels a pariah industry and to loosen up money that can be used to fund

the development of publicly owned renewable energy and other pro-climate projects such as coops advancing sustainable goods and services. Right now the governments—city, state, federal—are not doing this anywhere near the rate that is needed. Divestment campaigns help workers—union members and non-members, foundations, and university students realize that “their” money is being invested in industries that can extinguish human life on earth and cause great suffering in the process. Changing consciousness on how we all are complicit in the deadly fossil fuel economy is an important step toward standing up against fossil fuels in particular and in learning about how capitalism implicates us all and thus needs to be changed.

We need to move to 100 percent renewable energy as immediately as possible for the survival of our species and others as well. But to just call out the demand for a nationalized renewable energy system without articulating how it will be funded is not at all realistic. To have a chance at survival we need to start the process of developing that renewable energy now. However, it is not going to be adequately “profitable” for us to rely strictly on the private sector or on our present governments, governments which right now are stuck on militarism and defense of corporate greed through, for example, minimal taxes for the rich and corporations. We will need a range of financial instruments, such as government-guaranteed bonds and public banks that will allow pension, foundation, and university funds to invest safely in renewable energy development. Just as an example, right now New York state has only 4 percent of its energy coming from renewable sources. Hydropower, a questionable form of “renewable energy” adds another 15 percent to the mix. But that leaves about 80 percent of New York state energy coming from fossil fuels. This is not something that can be changed instantly—it will need an enormous amount of development, both of renewable energy sources and infrastructure, to deliver it. Revolutionary politics can help us understand what is happening, but I don’t see any signs that it will be embraced soon enough to make a significant difference in the development of renewable energy *in time*.

In time is key. A fossil-free economy is not inevitable at all. The ruling class as a whole is mixed on this issue, but the strongest sectors of the ruling class are perfectly comfortable with rising global temperatures, rising waters, and accelerated extreme-weather events including floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and droughts. They are comfortable with millions, perhaps billions, of people perishing in this period. They have not yet come to grips with the reality of those effects of reaching “tipping points” that their best engineers and mountaintop hideaways cannot protect them from.

So we need to see our roles as eco-socialists as two-fold: articulating what is really needed and articulating and organizing around what seems possible—moving the movement forward as quickly as we can. When more and more disasters keep rolling in, when people feel directly affected by the reality of climate change, eco-socialists will have developed relationships within the movement, pushed as hard as possible for demands that are winnable and transformative, and will have a fuller analysis to create more pathways to the world we want.