

The fallacies and evasions of the Green New Deal

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Last month, New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey, both Democrats, introduced a non-binding resolution in both houses of Congress calling for a “Green New Deal” to transition American energy production to non-carbon-based sources within 10 years. It is currently co-sponsored by 89 out of 235 Democrats in the House of Representatives and 11 out of 47 in the Senate.

Alongside calls for the federal government to take action to halt and reverse climate change and other ongoing ecological threats, the document proposes a federal mobilization comparable to the New Deal of the 1930s, which “created the greatest middle class the United States has ever seen.” It sees the present situation as an “historic opportunity” to secure for all people in the country the following: “clean air and water,” “healthy food,” a “sustainable environment,” “high-quality health care,” “affordable, safe and adequate housing,” “economic security,” and “a job with a family sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations and retirement security.”

The attempt to even raise such social and economic issues has provoked a backlash from politicians within both big business parties. Virtually the entire Republican Party has denounced it and Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has scheduled a vote in the Senate to force Democrats to publicly align with or dissociate themselves from the bill. The leader of the Democrats in Congress, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, has derisively referred to the resolution as a “green dream.” Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer has indicated the Democrats will vote “present” so as to evade the issue when it comes up for a vote.

Many Democratic supporters and co-sponsors of the Green New Deal have since backtracked, calling the proposal merely “aspirational.” In the words of co-sponsor and Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Amy Klobuchar, it is at best “something that we need to move toward.”

In other words, they have no intention of actually implementing it.

To be clear, it is a fiction that this proposal, even if it were adopted unanimously by both houses of Congress, would have any real impact on US domestic or foreign policy. Its non-binding status means that no lawmaker will in any way be beholden to working toward the resolution’s stated goals.

The sweeping nature of the resolution, however, has generated understandable popular interest and support among workers and youth. The Green New Deal proposes “to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions,” “to create millions of good, high-wage jobs and ensure prosperity and economic security for all people,” and “to invest in the infrastructure and industry of the United States.”

Ocasio-Cortez has raised some of the chief concerns of the bottom 90 percent of the income ladder in America, who comprise the working class. They face a daily struggle to survive and provide for their families, while the richest 10 percent, and especially the top 1 percent, 0.1 percent and 0.01 percent, monopolize an ever greater share of income and wealth.

It is all the more critical, therefore, to clarify the political character and

historical context of the Green New Deal. Its basic, although unstated, premises are (1) that global warming can be halted and reversed on a national basis; (2) that the Democratic Party can be made to carry out such a program; and (3) that it can be achieved within the framework of the existing economic and political system.

Nationalism and the climate crisis

It is an established scientific fact that human-induced climate change has already cost billions of dollars and caused thousands of deaths, and is poised to inflict exponentially greater social misery if it is not immediately abated and reversed. Repeated studies have shown that it will require the coordination of the most advanced scientific and technical resources the world over in order to even begin to seriously reduce global warming. Such measures would require an international reorganization of the world’s energy industry.

The Green New Deal resolution, however, neither calls for the cooperation of the nations of the world nor places any limits on the activities of the energy corporations. Quite the opposite, it insists on “making the United States the international leader on climate action” by calling for “investments to spur economic development [and] deepen and diversify industry and business in local and regional economies.” These investments would be allocated by means of “community grants, public banks, and other public financing.” In other words, more public funds will be handed over to the US energy monopolies and other corporate interests, the same institutions that are responsible for climate change in the first place. Any measures ostensibly aimed at reducing climate change will have to be acceptable to corporations and banks and their wealthy shareholders.

Far from advancing an internationalist perspective, the Green New Deal resolution has a distinctly nationalist axis. It makes an unambiguous appeal to the national security agencies of the American state, first by citing as a model the “Federal Government-led mobilizations during World War II,” and, second, by arguing that climate change “constitutes a direct threat to the national security of the United States by impacting the economic, environmental and social stability of countries and communities around the world and acting as a threat multiplier.”

The not-so-subtle suggestion here is that the adoption of the Green New Deal is an essential component of US imperialism’s preparations for war against its rivals for world domination and necessary for the stability of US capitalism. It should not be forgotten that the “Government-led mobilization during World War II” included the mass incarceration of Japanese-Americans and ended with the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“National security,” a euphemism for the continued rule of the capitalist

class and the pursuit of its global profit interests, is incompatible with any serious mobilization of resources to meet the social needs of working people, including a healthful and life-sustaining environment. Numerous national security think tank studies have stressed the need to drastically reduce so-called “entitlement” spending, i.e., funding for Social Security and Medicare, as well as spending for other social programs in order to carry out the military expansion and modernization necessary to prepare for war against the major rivals of American imperialism, in the first instance Russia and China.

The Democratic Party

Then there is the question of the Democratic Party. The notion that this party can serve as the vehicle for a serious effort to reverse climate change, or any other progressive social reform, is belied by its history and the social interests that control it.

Historically, the Democratic Party has served as the graveyard of progressive movements. From the populist movement at the turn of the 20th century, to the industrial union movement of the 1930s, to the civil rights movement and anti-war movement of the post-World War II period, mass movements for progressive social change have been contained, dissipated and betrayed by means of their subordination to this, the oldest capitalist party in the US.

No significant social reforms have been enacted in the US in more than 50 years. The Democrats long ago abandoned any program of social reform or any policies oriented to the social interests of the working class. Over the past half-century the Democratic Party has moved steadily and with increasing velocity to the right, seeking and largely succeeding in dislodging the Republicans as the favored party of Wall Street and the military/intelligence apparatus. On the basis of racial, gender and sexual politics—designed to deny the central class division of modern society—it has oriented itself to the super-rich and the most privileged layers of the middle class. In the last presidential election, Hillary Clinton won a majority of votes in affluent middle-class suburbs and among the richest layers of the population.

Democratic no less than Republican administrations have imposed austerity policies and prosecuted the decades-long social counterrevolution that continues today. Obama, whose election was hailed by the International Socialist Organization—one of the promoters of Bernie Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez today—as a “transformational” moment in American history, presided over the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street, the imposition of wage cuts on auto workers and mass school closures, and the greatest redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history. Under Obama, labor’s share of the national income hit record lows, and he boasted of reducing non-defense, non-entitlement domestic spending to the lowest levels since the Eisenhower years in the 1950s. The talk of a “new New Deal” that attended his election proved to be a cruel deception.

It is difficult to say which of the two major big business parties is more reactionary. The Democrats are basing their opposition to Trump on demands for a more aggressive policy toward Russia and an escalation of war in the Middle East, while supporting his raising of the Pentagon budget to near-record levels. In every struggle of the working class they work in lockstep with the Republicans to deny the workers’ demands, including the strikes by teachers for decent pay and the defense of public education, claiming “there is no money” for decent schools while they accelerate the privatization of the education system.

At the same time they glorify the CIA, FBI and the military and lead the campaign to censor the internet and suppress oppositional views. Their

primary domestic focus is the right-wing #MeToo sex witch hunt, based on the denial of due process and the presumption of innocence, and the promotion of racial politics to divide the working class.

The references to the “New Deal” by Ocasio-Cortez and other promoters of the “Green New Deal” are grossly misleading. They rip this period of limited social reform out of its historical context and distort both its origins and its results. The New Deal was the response of a frightened ruling class to the threat of social revolution heightened by two factors: the global breakdown of capitalism in the Great Depression of the 1930s and the revolutionary impulse provided by the Russian Revolution and the existence of the Soviet Union. Roosevelt’s reforms were not granted from on high by a benevolent ruling elite. They were extracted from a ruthless capitalist class by a semi-insurrectionary movement of the working class, in the form of a mass industrial union movement that was largely led by socialist-minded workers.

It came at a time when American capitalism was the rising and dominant industrial power in the world and the ruling class had massive economic reserves, even in the midst of the Depression. Even then, the reforms instituted never came close to overcoming economic inequality or securing the basic needs of the working class. The trade unions formed or consolidated out of the wave of sit-down strikes quickly made their peace with capitalism, signed on to the post-war Cold War and anti-socialist witch hunt and in the ensuing decades became junior partners with the corporations in imposing wage cuts, layoffs and the destruction of working conditions. This process was institutionalized through their alliance with the Democratic Party.

For the past 40 years, American capitalism has been in precipitous decline. It long ago dismantled much of its industrial base in order to become the world’s leader in financial parasitism and criminality. Over this entire period, every social reform from the 1930s and 1960s has been under relentless attack as part of a social counterrevolution, presided over by both parties, against the working class, making the US the most unequal country of all the major economies. Donald Trump is the fascistic personification of the financial oligarchy and the noxious expression of the protracted decay of American democracy.

Where do the Democrats get their money? In last year’s mid-term elections, the securities and investment industry gave 62 percent of its contributions to Democrats, continuing the trend from 2016, when Wall Street gave far more money to Hillary Clinton than to Donald Trump. The oil and gas industry, which has long given the bulk of its campaign bribes to Republicans, nevertheless handed out \$6 million to Democratic candidates in 2018.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is worth an estimated \$16 million and has high-end Wall Street connections via her husband’s firm Financial Leasing Services. She led the successful 2015 campaign to end a forty-year ban on crude oil exports, opening up the world market to US companies. For his part, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, known as the “senator from Wall Street,” has received \$310,020 from the oil and gas industry throughout his political career.

Social inequality and capitalism

The entire social structure of the United States, and therefore its political system, is anchored in the vast concentration of wealth at the very top. Speaking of a return to “Gilded Age levels” of inequality, the economist Gabriel Zucman recently wrote: “What the data show is that wealth concentration in the United States has returned to the level of 1920. Forty percent of total household wealth belongs to the top 1 percent. About 20 percent belongs to the top 0.1 percent, which is about the same as the

bottom 90 percent's wealth share.”

This is part of an international process. Earlier this year the British charity Oxfam reported that in 2018, just 26 people controlled as much wealth as the 3.8 billion people who comprise the bottom half of the world's population.

No genuine social reform can be enacted today outside of a direct assault on social inequality and the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate-financial oligarchy. That includes the political parties it controls.

The other basic obstacle to resolving the climate crisis and all of the other social ills that plague humankind is the division of the increasingly integrated world economy between rival nation-states, which are the political forms through which the competing national cliques of capitalists fight for control of the world's resources, markets and sources of cheap labor. Climate change is a global problem and can be solved only through the systematic and intelligent mobilization of the resources and scientific and technological know-how of the entire planet.

The Green New Deal is not a program to address the urgent social needs of working people in the US. It is a hollow slogan and grab-bag of demands meant to divert the growing struggle of the working class into the dead end of the Democratic Party. The solution to climate change, along with social inequality, poverty and the growing threat of dictatorship and war, is the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, both in the US and internationally.

The financial oligarchs must be expropriated and their corporations and banks turned into public utilities under the democratic control of the working population. The social force capable of carrying out such a transformation is the working class. It must be mobilized and armed with a revolutionary socialist program to take political power and establish a workers' state, as part of the world socialist revolution. The Socialist Equality Party must be built to lead this struggle.



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