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The climate blueprint that Europe's social democrats didn't write

The US democratic socialists' Green New Deal is the vision that Europe's Social Democrats should have drafted 20 years ago

Late last year, four US American authors – Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos – published their pamphlet A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal. Their socially minded version of the Green Deal is roughly what Europe's Social Democrats should have drafted 15 or 20 years ago: a from-below, egalitarian revamping of our fossil-fuel economy according to the principles of sustainability and social justice. 'Climate change, the economy, social inequalities – they're all tied up together,' write the authors, all of them either members of or close to the Democratic Socialists of America.

They recognise the gravity of the climate crisis – for our planet and civilisation – and at the same time unceremoniously yank the imperative out of the hands of the Greens, who have until now occupied the issue for sheer absence of a competitor. They stamp a distinctive social democratic insignia on the project, one quite different than that of the ever-more cautious, ever-more upper-middle-class Green parties. The authors' confidence is wholly unlike anything today's European social democrats can muster, who grudgingly admit that global warming is a big problem, though just one of many. In contrast, the Americans are saying: 'We're democratic socialists and we can do this decisive undertaking better!'

The social democratic way to fight global warming, argue the Americans, is 'through egalitarian policies that prioritise public goals over corporate profits, and target investments in poor, working class, and racialised communities.' 'Tackling the climate crisis,' they claim, 'will require actions from unions, social movements, Indigenous people, racial justice groups and others to take back the public power from the elites who've presided over the climate emergency.' Where does one hear this today in Europe?

This existential moment in human history, the authors argue, is the right time to roll back decades of neoliberal policies that have engendered such massive inequalities in wealth, flagrant racism and a climate crisis that endangers the very existence of humanity.

Taking system change seriously

They're right that this is a moment to question the system as a whole – one that social democrats most everywhere have made peace with but never really understood as their own. Now though, with the world facing so many crises simultaneously, the neoliberal precepts that have held sway since the 1980s are ripe for rejection. The Fridays for Future kids understand this. It's written plainly on their placards: 'System change not climate change,' 'The whole damn system is wrong' and 'Our planet cannot sustain this system,' among others. They chant 'What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!'

Perhaps it is exactly this surge of energy from below that wards off Europe's social democrats. The authors of *A Planet to Win* embrace it: 'We change [the] political math not by negotiating in the Beltway, but by building power beyond it—through elections and in the streets. Only mass mobilisation will turn out our demoralised voters [...] Only pressure from below can force judges, regulatory agencies and state and local politicians to go along with a Green New Deal.'

The US democratic socialists envision the dismantling the fossil fuel industry and transition to a green economy as a way to achieve social goals that have long eluded social democrats. They call this radical but actually it's not off-the-map. Many of the things they call for – such as the construction of zero-carbon housing and free public transportation – have to happen in one way or another if our planet is to remain inhabitable.

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Some are already happening. Take putting energy generation – or the means of production of energy, one might say – in the hands of the public. In Germany and Denmark, the clean energy transitions began as collective, grassroots initiatives and still today half of Germany's renewable energy capacity is in the hands of municipalities, private persons, farmers and collectives. This model has an array of advantages: it adds value to communities by providing them with revenue and jobs.

Moreover, those communities that are invested in renewable energy are those that want more of it, in contrast to the communities taking to the barricades to keep wind turbines out. Who can blame them for not wanting out-of-town developers erecting wind farms in their faces and having the proceeds flow into faraway pockets? Collectively owned energy production is a no-brainer, opposed understandably by private utilities and the by-now-desperate corporate energy giants.

The social democrats and green politics

But the authors go further than renewable energy. They want a massive spending program that also puts people to work fighting climate change: planting trees, restoring wetlands, building green infrastructure and laying tracks for high-speed trains. This is the big picture. It's not utopian fantasising but 'consistent with rapid decarbonization, safeguards against extreme weather, and a long-term shift away from the hyperprivatization of things,' as they say. There's just one major flaw: the American Green dealers overemphasise spending and undervalue the creation of laws that incentivise sustainability.

Why have Europe's social democrats handed over the entire field of climate politics to the Greens, sometimes even posing their own parties as the bulwarks against so-called Green extremism, job-killing coal-plant shutdowns and renewable energy run wild. No wonder they've lost so many voters – and Greens have collected them.

Sadly, it's not Europe's Social Democrats who have woken up to the message of America's Green New Deal enthusiasts and France's yellow jackets. Rather, the Greens have heard the music and adjusted to it: proceeds from carbon pricing, some Greens now say, should go to lower-income citizens to help them cope with high energy prices. The Greens could do a lot more to turn their climate politics into climate justice. But at least they have an ear to the ground.



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