

# Chomsky And Pollin: A Global Green New Deal Is The Only Way To Avert Disaster



*Robert Pollin*

Global warming is the biggest challenge facing humanity today. Yet, climate change has yet to become our number one priority even though, as the World Meteorological Organization warned back in March 2020, “[time is fast running out](#)” on averting an acute environmental catastrophe.

In this context, a comprehensive Green New Deal is urgently needed to be put into action. A Global Green New Deal. And, hopefully, the incoming Biden administration will not squander the opportunity to have the U.S. take the lead on climate emergency now that the Senate is under Democratic control.

In the interview that follows, Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin explain the urgency of undertaking ambitious efforts to respond globally to the existential crisis of climate change within the context of a just transition to a green economy. Chomsky and Pollin are joint recipients of the 2020 Climate Courage Award granted by the Climate Change Leadership Institute for their book *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal* and its articulation of “a global solution that is not only bold and viable but also replete with the need for a just transition.”

*C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the outgoing Trump administration was the worst thing that could have happened for the environment. Trump rolled out dozens of deregulation policies. His administration reversed the Obama-rule on methane*

*emissions, even though methane, the natural ingredient in natural gas, is 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Meanwhile he denied the science of climate change and withdrew the United States from the Paris climate agreement. What can we expect from the Biden administration on climate emergency, especially now that the Senate is under Democratic control, and why is it so important that the U.S. should rejoin the Paris Agreement?*



*Noam Chomsky*

*Noam Chomsky:* Rejoining the Paris Agreement is imperative, but only a bare beginning. The Agreement was an important step forward. It is, however, very weak, not even close to what has to be done. It also has no teeth: it is voluntary, no binding commitments. The primary reason for the weakness is the U.S. Republican Party, which would not permit anything that went much beyond symbolism. The Party is still there. In fact, it just achieved overwhelming success in the November 2020 elections, winning at every level except for the White House, where distaste for Trump's antics prevailed. That victory is quite astonishing if only in light of the fact that the Party's leaders were responsible for killing tens if not hundreds of thousands of Americans in the preceding months — not to speak of racing to the abyss of environmental catastrophe, a fact that scarcely registered.

The Party is still there, a dominating force, poised to ensure that the country is ungovernable, a specialty of Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell as he proclaimed with pride during the Obama years and demonstrated with considerable success.

And Trump is not gone, far from it. A large majority of the Republican voting base regards him as their leader, if not savior. They can be whipped up to threaten any Republican office holder who dares to depart from Trump-McConnell

malevolence, much as the Tea Party was organized and used for that purpose, with plenty of funding from powerful concentrations of capital. It may be recalled that as recently as 2008, during the McCain campaign, Republicans were willing to entertain the thought that there might be some problem about destroying the climate that sustains life. With virtual unanimity, they succumbed to a juggernaut launched by David Koch to extirpate that heresy, a victory that remains in place. With Trump setting himself up as the “true victor” in the elections, stirring up poisons in the ways he masters very well, there will be serious barriers to returning the country to a moderately civilized course.

How serious the barriers are we saw right before our eyes on January 6, a fateful day.

Ever since he gained office, Trump has been working hard to turn the country into a tin-pot dictatorship under his rule, a process we have been discussing regularly in this forum as it has unfolded.

To repeat briefly, there have been three prongs to the assault against the world by this miserable creature:

1. Destroying the environment that sustains life
2. Sharply increasing the threat of terminal nuclear war;
3. Dismantling formal democracy.

The first one alone suffices to establish him as arguably the most dangerous political figure in human history, a truism that has been hard for many to contemplate.

Right now we are witnessing the next step in his dedication to destroy American democracy. He has been bragging for years about the “Tough Guys for Trump” — his Black and Brown Shirts.

On January 6, he unleashed them, encouraging their violence and destruction as they broke into the Capitol Building to prevent formal ratification of his electoral defeat, which, it seems, he will never acknowledge no matter how much destruction is caused by his malevolence.

In his disgraceful performance calling on his tough guys to go home — for now — he could not refrain from stirring up more poisons with brazen lies about how his “landslide victory” was stolen by evil forces, doing what he can to ensure

maximum damage to the country to which he intends to return triumphantly to complete the wreckage.

That is only one force the Biden administration will have to overcome to save the country, and the world, from environmental catastrophe. Another is the Democratic National Committee (DNC) — Clintonite, neoliberal, oriented to Wall Street and the donor class. The intraparty conflict began to emerge even before the election. One central element was global warming. Under significant popular pressure, the Biden-Harris environmental program moved in a fairly progressive direction; insufficient, but a considerable step beyond predecessors. As we've discussed before, the DNC reacted by cutting it back.

The impediments to the urgently needed policy are extreme, but there are also popular forces that cannot be ignored. They are imposing what the powerful call "reputational risks" that have to be dealt with, sometimes in meaningful ways. And power does not make those who wield it totally impervious to human concerns. Whatever the mix of factors may be, there are changes taking place within the institutions that dominate the society. European-based fossil fuel companies are shifting toward sustainable energy. Bank of America, the last holdout, joined other major banks in refusing to join Trump's last-ditch effort to destroy the Arctic nature reserve. Popular activism can influence those who own the country... And it can influence the government as well, despite the impediments over a spectrum from the DNC to the far right.

The outcome of this struggle for survival will determine what we can expect from the Biden administration.

*Polychroniou: Bob, you have made a strong case that any Green New Deal must be global in nature and scope if we are serious about addressing the climate emergency. How do you envision such an undertaking taking place, and what should be done with the less developed countries that don't have the resources to embark on a transition to clean and renewable energy systems?*

*Robert Pollin: The Green New Deal must be global in scope, whether we like it or not. This is the only possible way to have a chance of bringing global carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions down to zero by 2050, which is the goal that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has set as the requirement for moving onto a climate stabilization path.*

The evidence on current global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions makes this clear. Thus, China and the U.S. are by far the biggest sources of emissions, with China at 27 percent and the U.S. at 15 percent. So adding emissions from China and the U.S. alone gets us to 42 percent of the global total. But we can also look at this same statistic from the opposite direction: even after combining the emissions levels for China and the U.S., we still haven't accounted for fully 58 percent of the global total. We can also push the individual country emissions figures a bit further, and include all 27 countries of the European Union (EU) along with the United States and China. This adds another 10 percent to current total emissions, getting us to 52 percent of global emissions with China, the United States and the 27 EU countries combined. Therefore, if we only pay attention to China, the U.S. and all EU countries, we still are neglecting the countries responsible for generating nearly half of current total global emissions. The point is that every place does matter if we really are going to hit the target of net zero global emissions by no later than 2050. Zero emissions does mean *zero*, everywhere. If we let some small countries, or low-income countries, off the hook, then where do we draw the line and still get to the zero emissions goal?

This is especially true if we are also serious about raising mass living standards in low-income countries. In areas such as rural Africa and India, roughly half of the population has no access to electricity at present. Raising living standards in low-income countries will entail providing affordable energy, for people to light and heat their homes, for cooking and to improve transportation systems. It will also mean that, especially in rural areas of the developing world, women will be able to stop spending hours every day gathering wood to burn for cooking and heating. The energy supply that will deliver this rise in mass living standards will need to be renewable energy, provided at high efficiency levels — solar and wind energy primarily, but also some geothermal, small-scale hydro and low-emissions bioenergy.

Developing countries therefore need large-scale investments to build clean energy infrastructures. By my estimates, this will cost about 2 to 3 percent of overall spending (GDP) in these economies every year between now and 2050. That is not an overwhelming amount of money; it means that 97 percent of the economy's overall spending can be devoted to other things, like growing food in abundance, creating good-quality housing, transportation, education, health care, as well as producing some local manufactured goods. Still, that 3 percent of total

spending needs to come from somewhere. As a basic standard of fairness, most of the funds should be provided by the high-income countries. This is because the high-income countries, starting with the U.S. but also including Canada, Western Europe, Japan and Australia are primarily responsible for loading up the atmosphere with greenhouse gases and causing climate change. There are straightforward ways for the high-income countries to raise these investment funds, including cutting military spending, eliminating fossil fuel subsidies and having the major central banks, starting with the U.S. Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank, purchase Green Bonds from the governments of low-income countries at zero- or near-zero interest rates.

That said, it should also be clear that in the low-income countries, as well as the high-income countries, clean energy investments will pay for themselves over time. This is because investing in dramatically raising energy efficiency levels will mean that people will be able to, for example, heat and light their homes with much less energy. In addition, investments in renewable energy will mean lower prices for the energy you do have to buy. It is already the case that, in both low- and high-income economies, average prices for renewable energy are comparable to or lower than those for fossil fuels and nuclear power, and these renewable energy costs are also falling.

*Polychroniou: The Global Green New Deal that you have proposed makes top priority a just transition for the workforce employed in the fossil fuel economy. Can you talk a bit about this issue?*

*Pollin:* Investments to build a clean energy economy will be a major source of job creation in all regions of the world. Countries at all levels of development will experience significant gains in job creation relative to maintaining their existing fossil fuel infrastructures. Research that I have conducted with co-workers has found this relationship to hold in Brazil, China, Germany, Greece, India, Indonesia, Puerto Rico, South Africa, South Korea, Spain and the United States. As a rough approximation, I estimate the increase in employment worldwide would be in the range of 160 million jobs per year on average between 2021 and 2030.

At the same time, workers and communities throughout the world whose livelihoods depend on people consuming oil, coal and natural gas will lose out in the clean energy transition. It is only a modest exaggeration to say that the fate of

the planet depends on whether we can put in place just transition policies for these workers and communities that will be negatively impacted by the decline and shuttering of the fossil fuel industry. Just transition policies are certainly justified according to any standard of fairness. But they are also a matter of strategic politics. In the absence of such adjustment assistance programs operating at a major scale, the workers and communities facing retrenchment from the clean energy investment project will, predictably and understandably, fight to defend their communities and livelihoods. This in turn will create unacceptable delays in proceeding with effective climate stabilization policies.

Considering the U.S. economy, co-workers and I have estimated that a rough high-end figure for such a program would average less than \$1 billion per year over 2021 to 2030 — that is, well below one one-hundredth of 1 percent of U.S. GDP. This level of funding would provide strong support in two areas: (1) income, retraining and relocation support for workers facing retrenchments; and (2) guaranteeing the pensions for workers in the affected industries. Comparable programs will of course need to be implemented in other country settings. The proportional costs as a share of GDP in all other economies is not likely to be much higher than the U.S. figure. In short, generous just transition policies for workers and communities that are currently dependent on the fossil fuel industry need to be included as a centerpiece of all Green New Deal programs throughout the world.

*Polychroniou: Noam, it is generally agreed that labor must play a leading role in tackling the existential crisis of global warming. What are the arguments that climate emergency is a labor issue?*

*Chomsky:* To begin with, the climate emergency is a human emergency — in fact, an emergency for almost all living things. We are not just racing to destroy ourselves, a careening course accelerated by an array of villainous masters of the private economy and the state, but also the animal kingdom and much of the rest of the organic world. Human destructiveness, culminating in the Anthropocene, reaches levels of depravity that can hardly be captured in words, at least mine. Nor can words capture the failure to comprehend what is happening before our eyes.

Working people are humans, in fact the large majority of the species. A human emergency is an issue for labor by definition. More specifically, overcoming this

emergency will require great changes in the kinds of work that people do, over a very broad range. One obvious case is fossil fuel workers. They will have to be helped in the transition to a new economy — one in which they can have better lives and work, a topic that Bob has studied in detail. If Democratic party leaders had cared enough about working people, they would have been organizing in oil-producing areas instead of conceding them to the Republicans with their easy and cynical tales of how Biden's goal is to take away their jobs and destroy their communities with some liberal hoax about climate. Another clear case is agricultural practices, which will have to be radically changed if we hope to survive. Constructing a new and much better society — and one that can survive — should open up a vast array of new and much better employment opportunities in manufacturing, construction, education, health, in fact, every area of life.

Throughout modern history, organized labor and labor activists have been in the lead in creating a better world. Reagan and Thatcher, and those behind them, knew very well what they were doing when they launched the neoliberal assault on global society by targeting unions, the main line of defense for working people in the bitter class war that they sharply accelerated. Labor has also been in the lead in the areas of our current concern. One of the earliest and most far-sighted environmentalists was the great labor leader Tony Mazzocchi, a high official of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union (OCAW), workers on the front line in enduring the effects of the industrial pollution that is destroying the planet. Reviving his Labor party initiative is not an idle dream. Along with badly needed revival of the labor movement, it might be one prong in the broad effort that is imperative if we are to escape from the catastrophe we are creating and move on to a better life.

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*C.J. Polychroniou* is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese,



Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [\*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change\*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.