

Chomsky And Pollin: COP26 Pledges Will Fail Unless Pushed By Mass Organizing



Noam Chomsky

The 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which takes place in Glasgow from October 31-November 12, will bring together more than 120 world leaders for 12 days of talks aimed at forming an agreement on how to tackle the climate emergency. The expectation is that countries will produce 2030 emissions reductions targets that will secure global net zero by 2050. For that to happen, the phase-out of coal must be accelerated, deforestation must be curtailed and investment in green energy must rise significantly.

The urgency for action at COP26 cannot be overstated. We are running out of chances to save the planet from a climate catastrophe. But in order for the stated goals of COP26 to be attained, it is imperative that narrow views of national interest be put aside and great powers steer clear of geopolitical confrontations. Indeed, without international cooperation, the continued use of fossil fuels is set to drive societies across the globe into climate chaos and collapse.

So, what can we expect from COP26? Definite action or, as Greta Thunberg recently put it, more “blah, blah, blah?” In this expansive and eye-opening interview, leading scholars Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin share their thoughts and insights about the upcoming global climate summit and what must ultimately be done to save humanity and the planet from a global climate catastrophe. Noam

Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and currently Laureate Professor of Linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. Chomsky, one of the most cited scholars in history and long considered one of the U.S.'s voices of conscience, is joined by one of the world's leading economists of the left, Robert Pollin, Distinguished Professor and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Chomsky and Pollin are co-authors of the recently published book *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy to Save the Planet*.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, COP26 is believed to be our “last best hope” for meaningful action to tackle the climate crisis. Why is COP26 so important? And wasn't pretty much the same thing said about COP21?

Noam Chomsky: It was indeed, and correctly. The concept of “last best hope” keeps narrowing. What's the last best hope at one point is gone later, and the remaining last best hope becomes far more difficult to realize.

That's been true since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, ratified by 192 nations, but not the U.S. The Senate would not accept it. George W. Bush pulled out completely; later Canada, did as well. Kyoto was the last best hope in 1997. If the U.S. had joined, the task of escaping devastating climate change would have been far easier.

By 2015 (the Paris Agreement, COP21), the “best hope” was much more remote and difficult to realize. Again, the U.S. Senate blocked it. More precisely, the plan was for a verifiable treaty, but Republicans would not accept that, so it was reduced to toothless voluntary agreements. And shortly after, Trump pulled out completely. Biden has formally rejoined, but what that means remains to be seen.

Right now, the Republican commitment to destroying the planet in the interest of short-term profit for their prime constituency of extreme wealth seems unassailable. But it was not always so. As we've [discussed before](#), in 2008, there were signs of a deviation towards minimal concern for the fate of humanity, but it didn't last long. A juggernaut by the huge Koch Brothers energy conglomerate quickly returned the Party to obedience, since unchanged.

In defense of the stand of what was once a genuine political party, we should take note of the fact that the U.S. very rarely accepts international conventions, and

when it does so, it is with reservations that render them inapplicable to the U.S. That's even true of the Genocide Convention.

One may plausibly argue, however, that these fine distinctions are all irrelevant. Even when the U.S. fully accepts international treaties, it violates them at will, hence also violating the U.S. Constitution, which declares them to be the Supreme Law of the Land, binding on the political leadership. The clearest case is the UN Charter, the basis for modern international law. It bans "the threat or use of force" in international affairs, with reservations irrelevant to the constant violation of the Treaty (and the Constitution) by U.S. presidents.

So normal that it virtually never elicits a comment.

Discourse on international affairs has found a way around these inconvenient facts by devising the concept of a "rule-based international order," as contrasted with the old-fashioned "UN-based international order." The former is preferred, since the U.S. can set the rules and determine how and when they can be enforced — an interesting topic, but not for now.

A treaty on climate change, if it can be reached, is in a different category. Survival is at stake. The basic facts are brutally clear, more so with each passing year. They are laid out clearly enough in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, released on August 9. In brief, any hope of avoiding disaster requires taking significant steps right away to reduce fossil fuel use, continuing annually with the goal of effectively phasing out fossil fuel use by mid-century. We are approaching a precipice. A few steps more, and we fall over it, forever.

Falling off the precipice does not imply that everyone will die soon; there's a long way down. Rather, it means that irreversible tipping points will be reached, and barring some now-unforeseen technological miracle, the human species will be entering a new era: one of inexorable decline, with mounting horrors of the kind we can easily depict, extrapolating realistically from what already surrounds us — an optimistic estimate, since non-linear processes may begin to take off and dangers lurk that are only dimly perceived.

It will be an era of "*sauve qui peut*" — run for your lives, everyone for themselves, material catastrophe heightened by social collapse and wholesale psychic trauma

of a kind never before experienced. And on the side, an assault on nature of indescribable proportions.

All of this is understood at a very high level of confidence. Even a relic of rationality tells us that it is ridiculous to take a chance on its being mistaken, considering the stakes.

We might tarry for a moment on the date of the release of the IPCC report: August 9. Whether by accident or design, the choice is a momentous date in human affairs: the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Putting aside the horrors and the dubious efforts at justification, the Hiroshima bombing a few days earlier demonstrated that human intelligence would soon reach the level of being able to destroy everything. Nagasaki demonstrated that the commitment to attain this goal was deeply entrenched in the reigning sociopolitical system and intellectual culture. What remained open was whether human moral capacities, and the institutions humans had created, had the capacity to overcome what human intellect was on the verge of achieving: total cataclysm. After 75 frightening years, the question still remains open even as prospects shrink for a hopeful answer.

The crisis of environmental destruction — which extends well beyond the crime of global heating — raises quite similar questions.

The evidence at hand is not encouraging. Let's go back to August 9, 2021, with its clear warning that we must begin now to reduce fossil fuel use.

Immediately on receipt of this grim warning, the president of the most powerful state in world history issued an appeal to the global oil cartel OPEC to *increase* production. Europe followed suit, joined by the rest of what is called "advanced society." The reason is an energy crunch. That's doubtless a problem. One way to deal with it is to race towards the precipice. Another is for the rich in the rich societies, the major culprits, to tighten their belts while we sharply accelerate transition to sustainable energy.

The choice is unfolding before our eyes.

Petroleum industry journals are euphoric, announcing promising new discoveries that they can exploit to enhance production and reveling in the prospects for growing demand for their poisons. A few examples fill in details.

Germany is reacting to the August warning by joining in the call for increasing fossil fuel use and making its own contribution, for example, by [destroying villages](#) to expand coal mining.

Turning to the U.S., a mere [60 percent](#) of voters regard global warming as an urgent problem for government. It is only the most urgent problem that humans have ever faced.

The party breakdown is the usual one: Among Republicans, 45 percent of “liberal/moderate Republicans” see global warming as an urgent problem along with 17 percent of “conservative Republicans.” The persisting lethal denialism is not a great surprise in the light of pronouncements of the leadership and the media to which they are exposed.

Thanks to significant popular activism, Biden’s major program, now being torn to shreds in Congress, did include some useful steps on climate change. Nothing seems likely to survive. Republicans are 100 percent opposed. Democrats need unanimity to pass anything. The Senate chair of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources is a right-wing Democrat, also a coal baron and the leading recipient of fossil fuel funding in Congress: Joe Manchin. His position on climate concerns is simple: “[spending on innovation, not elimination](#).” Straight out of the fossil fuel industry playbook.

In South America, destruction of the Amazon is proceeding apace for the benefit of the domestic and international corporate sector, which has been hailing the policies of Chicago School Economics Minister Paulo Guedes: “privatize everything,” and who cares about the consequences. Recent scientific studies [have found](#) that “the southeastern Amazon was releasing more carbon than it was absorbing, even in rainy years when scientists had expected the forest to be in better health. It meant a part of the rainforest was no longer helping to slow climate change, but adding to the emissions driving it.”

That is a disaster for Brazil and indeed for the world, given the role of the huge tropical forests in regulating the global climate.

A [leaked report](#) of governmental efforts to weaken the IPCC study shows that the usual scoundrels are at work.

Saudi Arabia calls for eliminating such phrases as “the need for urgent and

accelerated mitigation actions at all scales” and “the focus of decarbonisation efforts in the energy systems sector needs to be on rapidly shifting to zero-carbon sources and actively phasing out fossil fuels.” It is joined by OPEC, along with fossil fuel producers Argentina and Norway.

Saudi officials elaborated further. Giving no details, one Saudi prince explained that a transition to net-zero carbon emissions is welcome, but it must be reached through a “carbon circular economy” — a plan built around initiatives such as recycling and carbon removal.

Just innovation, no elimination.

Saudi officials and the chief executive of Saudi oil giant Aramco, [the press reports](#), “expect demand for oil to continue and for it to be the dominant energy source for decades to come, and argue that reducing supply before demand drops risks a dangerous oil price spike, hurting economies such as Saudi Arabia’s that are dependent on oil and gas.”

Turning [elsewhere](#), “A senior Australian government official rejects the conclusion that closing coal-fired power plants is necessary” — a stand that is perhaps related to Australia’s position as the world’s leading coal exporter.

Continuing with the submissions to the IPCC, “Brazil and Argentina, two of the biggest producers of beef products and animal feed crops in the world, argue strongly against evidence in the draft report that reducing meat consumption is necessary to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Both countries call on the authors to delete or change some passages in the text referring to ‘plant-based diets’ playing a role in tackling climate change, or which describe beef as a ‘high carbon’ food.”

Again, not surprisingly, “A significant number of Switzerland’s comments are directed at amending parts of the report that argue developing countries will need support, particularly financial support, from rich countries in order to meet emission reduction targets.”

In brief, as we fall off the precipice, the near-uniform reaction is that: *I want to grasp my share of the loot as doomsday approaches.*

Returning to the still-open question posed by the August 9 anniversary, do human moral capacities, and the institutions humans have created, have the capacity to

overcome what human intellect and these institutions have shown themselves capable of achieving: total cataclysm?

The answer will soon be known.

And while reflecting on the unanswered question, we should never forget that human intellect has also forged feasible solutions to impending crises, easily at hand, though not for long.

Given our experience up to now with global climate talks, should we really have high expectations about the outcome of COP26? After all, in addition to everything you mentioned above, global oil demand is booming, China continues to build coal-fired power plants around the world, the U.S. is bent on maintaining its hegemonic status in the world system, and we not only have a divided world but a world where now the majority of citizens say that their country's society is more divided than ever before. Indeed, what can we realistically expect from COP26?

Chomsky: The business press is generally fairly realistic. Its audience has a stake in knowing what's happening in the world. So, to answer the question, it is useful to open today's (October 24) business press and read the first paragraph of the [major article](#) on what we can realistically expect: "As the prospects for strong government action to curb climate change grow less certain, energy shares, and especially coal mining stocks, are generating astonishing returns." The article goes on to review the great opportunities for huge short-term profits for the super-rich while they destroy the diminishing hopes for a livable world for their children.

Economists soberly explain that this is a "market failure" caused by "externalities" — uncounted costs. Not false. The article quotes a recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) study that found that that "market-based fossil fuel prices in 2020 failed to account for \$5.9 trillion in global environmental costs, equivalent to 6.8 percent of global gross domestic product. The I.M.F. estimated that the gap will rise to 7.4 percent of world G.D.P. by 2025."

Not false, but misleading. Market failures occur all the time, with increasing intensity since the heralded "market revolution" that has assaulted the world since Ronald Reagan opened the doors to wholesale robbery 40 years ago. But the anodyne phrase "market failure" does not begin to do justice to the monstrous

crime that state-backed capitalist institutions are perpetrating.

The business press gives little reason to be optimistic about the outcome of COP26, but it's worth remembering that it does not consider what humans can accomplish, if they choose. With regard to human effort and action, the outcome of COP26 doesn't matter all that much. If governments make pledges, they won't implement them without extensive popular activism. If they don't make pledges, they won't be driven to adopt and implement them without extensive popular activism. The message is much the same whatever the outcome: More work, lots more, on many fronts, not excluding the long-term dedication to dismantle lethal institutions and the doctrines that chain people to them.

Bob, the economics of global warming and global climate stabilization are quite straightforward. Indeed, a broad consensus has emerged about the economic impacts of global warming, although there is disagreement among economists about the best solutions to achieve significant reductions in carbon emissions. Why is it so difficult to implement viable climate policies even at the national, let alone the global, level?



Robert Pollin

Robert Pollin: Let's start with the most obvious obstacle to advancing viable climate policies, which is the implacable opposition of the fossil fuel companies. Here I refer to both the private companies, such as ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell as well as public corporations such as Saudi Aramco, Gazprom in Russia and Petrobras in Brazil. Let's assume we are working with the target set out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that we must stabilize the average global temperature at no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (1.5°C) above preindustrial levels. Within that framework, the most recent [careful research](#) by

Tyler Hansen shows that the extent of total fossil fuel assets owned by these corporations that are “unburnable” — i.e., cannot be burned to produce energy if the world has a chance of achieving the 1.5°C stabilization target — amounts to between \$13-\$15 trillion. Of this total, about 75 percent of these fossil fuel assets, between about \$10-\$11 trillion, are owned by the public corporations, with the remaining \$3-\$5 trillion owned by private corporations. We should not be surprised that the fossil fuel companies are fighting by all means available to them to continue profiting lavishly from selling this oil, coal and natural gas still in the ground. They don’t want to hear about dumping \$15 trillion in assets.

It’s true that the publicly owned national companies, controlling approximately 90 percent of the globe’s total fossil fuel reserves, do not operate with precisely the same profit imperatives as big private energy corporations. But let’s be clear that this does not mean that they are prepared to commit to fighting climate change simply because their stated mission is to serve the public as opposed to private shareholders, and because we, the public, face a global environmental emergency. Just as with the private companies, producing and selling fossil fuel energy generates huge revenue flows for these publicly owned companies. National development projects, lucrative careers and political power all depend on continuing the flow of large fossil fuel revenues.

Overall, then, there is no getting around that the interests of these fossil fuel companies will simply have to be defeated. Obviously, that will not be easy to accomplish. We are seeing this right now in the U.S., with Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia doing everything possible to kill even the minimally decent climate provisions of Biden’s Build Back Better program. Manchin himself started his own coal brokerage company in the state and continues to [receive large profits](#) from it. We are also seeing it on a global scale, with Russian President Vladimir Putin issuing [dire warnings](#) of upcoming energy shortages if investments to expand fossil fuel supply do not increase.

But it is also critical to recognize that the fossil fuel companies are not the only obstacle to advancing a viable global climate stabilization project. There is also the matter of pure inertia, which cannot be overlooked. We are faced with the challenge of building a new global energy infrastructure on the foundations of high efficiency and clean renewable energy, while also phasing out our existing fossil fuel-dominant energy infrastructure. This has to be a hugely challenging project, even under the best of circumstances and even putting aside

machinations of the fossil fuel companies. I have experienced this firsthand, for example, in our project at UMass-Amherst in which we built the first [zero-emissions office building](#) in western Massachusetts to house the Economics Department. There are lots of new ways of doing things that need to be learned, in terms of engineering, use of materials and workers developing new skills. It also requires people cooperating effectively.

There is also the absolutely critical question of “just transition” for workers and communities whose livelihoods are, at present, dependent on the fossil fuel industry. In my view, just transition has to be at the center of any global Green New Deal project. There is no denying that these workers and communities throughout the world will lose out in the clean energy transition. In order for the global clean energy project to succeed, it must provide adequate transitional support for these workers and communities. It is a matter of simple justice, but it is also a matter of strategic politics. Without 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.

My co-workers and I have estimated the costs of a very generous just transition program for all workers in the United States now tied to the fossil fuel and ancillary industries, working with the assumption that all fossil fuel production will have been shut down by 2050. This program would include a re-employment guarantee with wages at least matching the workers current pay, along with pension guarantees, and, as needed, retraining and relocation support. We [estimated](#) these total costs as averaging about \$3 billion per year. This would be equal to roughly 1/100 of one percent (0.01 percent) of average U.S. GDP between now and 2050. In other words, in terms of financing, it would be a trivial matter to establish this sort of just transition program throughout the U.S.

In fact, path-breaking developments are occurring right now in California toward advancing a just transition program in the state. This movement is being led by visionary labor leaders in the state, including leaders of the state’s oil refinery workers’ union. One such leader, Norman Rogers, a vice president of United Steelworkers Local 675, recently [wrote](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* that, *Though the energy transition is inevitable, a just version is not. Workers know*

what happens when whole industries go away: Companies maneuver behind our backs, squeeze every last drop of work out of a dying auto plant, steel mill or coal mine and shutter it overnight, devastating communities and stiffing workers out of jobs, pensions and healthcare. The fear is real of jobs lost with no plan for when operations begin to phase out.

Rogers emphasizes that “many speak of a ‘just transition,’ but we’ve never seen one. No worker or community member will ever believe that an equitable transition is possible until we see detailed, fully funded state [safety net](#) and job creation programs.” But he, optimistically, is arguing that, “With a fully funded equitable transition plan — meeting the immediate need for a safety net for workers and communities, and offering a bold vision to restructure our economy — we can jump-start recovery and move California’s workers, communities and the planet toward a more secure future.”

The enactment of a robust just transition program in California, led by the state’s labor unions, including its fossil fuel industry unions, will also provide a model for comparable measures to be adopted throughout the U.S. and globally. Supporting such initiatives should therefore be understood as an absolute first-tier priority for the U.S. and the global climate movement.

China has emerged as a global economic superpower in the last couple of decades and, in fact, since 2008 tops the annual list of being the largest emitter of greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, although we get a different picture if we look at carbon emissions per capita. Be that as it may, what sort of finance conditions need to be introduced in countries like China and in emerging economies for a successful transition to clean energy resources without sacrificing economic and social development?

Pollin: As of the most recent data, global carbon dioxide emissions were at about 34 billion tons. China is generating about 10 billion tons, 30 percent of this total, making it by far the country with the largest share of total emissions. The U.S. is next at about 5 billion tons, 15 percent of the total. The countries of the European Union (EU) account for another 9 percent. Thus, China, the U.S. and the EU are responsible for [54 percent](#) of all global emissions. They all need to drive their emissions down to zero no later than 2050 for there to be any chance of meeting the IPCC’s global emissions reduction targets of a 45 percent decline by 2030 and a net-zero global economy by 2050.

It's true that in terms of emissions per person, China's figure, at 7.4 tons per person, is still less than half the 15.2 tons per person figure for the United States. But it remains the case that China must go from its current total emissions level of 10 billion tons down to zero by 2050, just as the U.S. needs its emissions to fall absolutely, from 5 billion tons to zero.

It also follows that, even if China, the U.S. and the EU managed to push their carbon dioxide emissions down to zero tomorrow, we would still be only a bit more to halfway to achieving the global zero emissions goal, since the rest of the world is today responsible for about 46 percent of all emissions. It is therefore obvious that the transition to a global clean energy system has to be a global project. The transition has to be advancing in India, Vietnam, Australia, Kenya, Puerto Rico, Chile, South Korea, South Africa and Mexico just as much as in China, the U.S. and EU.

Building clean energy infrastructures in developing economies will not entail sacrificing economic and social development. Indeed, the Green New Deal remains focused on expanding good job opportunities, raising mass living standards and fighting poverty along with driving emissions to zero. All of these aims can be realistically accomplished, since investments in clean energy will be a major engine of job creation. Moreover, the costs of clean energy investments are already [lower](#), on average, than those for fossil fuels. Building a clean energy infrastructure will also support the expansion of a range of new public and private ownership forms. This includes small-scale community ownership in rural low-income communities, such as in sub-Saharan Africa. To date, roughly half of such communities still do not have access to electricity of any kind, despite generations of promises made by politicians of all stripes.

At the same time, we cannot expect low-income countries to finance their clean energy and just transition programs on their own. I have sketched out a global financing framework, in which there are four main components. Other approaches could also be viable. These four funding sources are: 1) a global carbon tax, in which 75 percent of revenues are rebated back to the public but 25 percent are channeled into clean energy investment projects; 2) transferring funds out of military budgets from all countries, but primarily the U.S.; 3) eliminating all existing fossil fuel subsidies and channeling 25 percent of the funds into clean energy investments; and 4) a Green Bond lending program, initiated by the U.S. Federal Reserve and European Central Bank, with other major central banks in

China, the U.K. and Japan also participating. Strong cases can be made for each of these funding measures. But each proposal does also have vulnerabilities, including around political feasibility. The most sensible approach is therefore to combine the measures into a single package that minimizes their respective weaknesses as standalone measures.

I work through some of the details of these proposals in our 2020 book, [*Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal*](#). But let's briefly consider the Green Bond financing proposal by way of illustration. This program will not take money out of anyone's pocket. It rather involves the world's major central banks effectively printing money as needed. This would be just as they did during both the 2007-09 global financial crisis and during the COVID recession, except on a far more modest scale than the largesse that the central banks [*showered on Wall Street and global financial elite*](#) to keep them afloat. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the U.S. Fed or European Central Bank should rely on this policy — what is technically known as “debt monetization” — on a routine basis. But we need to be equally clear that this is a fully legitimate option that the major central banks have in their toolkit, and that this option should indeed be brought into action under crisis conditions. Note here that the funds will be generated by the major central banks but then distributed globally on an equitable basis, to underwrite the clean energy investment projects at scale in all regions of the globe. Public investment banks in all regions, but especially in low-income countries, will then serve as primary conduits in moving specific investment projects forward.

What would you consider as the optimal outcome of the talks at the COP 26 summit?

Pollin: The optimal outcome would be for the summit to not produce another round of what Greta Thunberg has accurately described as the “blah, blah, blah” which has resulted from previous such gatherings. COP26 needs to establish truly binding commitments on all countries that would include the following:

1. Meeting at least the IPCC's emissions reduction targets, of a 45 percent global emissions cut by 2030 and to achieve zero emissions by 2050;
2. Mounting robust just transition programs in all countries and regions, to support workers and communities that will be negatively impacted by the emissions reduction project; and
3. Paying for these binding commitments through strongly egalitarian

financing measures.

Noam, the impact of human activities on the environment is so real and profound that past, present and future are interlinked in such way that there can be no blurring between the empirical and the normative. The climate crisis has created a global storm and cooperation and solidarity are essential prerequisites to the survival of the planet. However, given the daunting task that lays ahead (shrinking and ultimately eliminating emissions while advancing at the same time a framework of development that embraces both developed and developing countries and guaranteeing a socially just transition), how do we encourage activists and concerned citizens alike to remain committed to a struggle where the outcome is uncertain without succumbing to defeatism?

Chomsky: Outcomes have always been uncertain. Defeatism is not an option; it translates as “species suicide, bringing down much of life on Earth with it.”

There are steps forward. Crucially, there is widespread understanding of the measures that can be take, quite realistically, to avert impending disaster and move on to a much better world. That includes the comprehensive and detailed studies by our friend and colleague economist Robert Pollin, by economist Jeffrey Sachs, and by the International Energy Agency, all coming to generally similar conclusions. These results have also reached Congress in a 2019 resolution recently reintroduced by its sponsors, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey. It’s all there to be acted upon.

And while Sen. Joe Manchin is working assiduously to block any congressional action that departs from the “no elimination” death warrant issued by the energy corporations, his constituents in West Virginia are showing more concern for survival. A [recent report](#) of the United Mine Workers recognizes that, “Change is coming, whether we seek it or not. Too many inside and outside the coalfields have looked the other way when it comes to recognizing and addressing specifically what that change must be, but we can look away no longer.”

The union supports a transition to renewable energy, rightly insisting that workers receive good jobs — which should in fact be better jobs, as can be readily accomplished along lines that Bob Pollin has laid out in his studies and conveyed to the public in his grassroots work in West Virginia and other mining states, where unions are moving in the same direction.

There has also been considerable progress since COP21: sharp reduction in cost of sustainable energy, significant steps towards electrification and constant pressure to do more, mostly by the young, those who will have to endure the consequences of our folly and betrayal of their hopes. The recent global climate strike was a noteworthy example.

Another hopeful sign is the recovery of the labor movement from the state-corporate blows that were a salient feature of the neoliberal years from their outset, with deep roots in the origins of neoliberal doctrine in interwar Vienna. That's a long and important story, but there are many indications that it is underway, somewhat reminiscent of the early 1930s. The vibrant U.S. labor movement had been almost crushed by state-corporate violence. But as the Depression hit, it began to revive, and spearheaded the New Deal moves towards social democracy that greatly improved the lives of [many, though not all] Americans. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the business counteroffensive became powerful enough to restore a system of radical inequality and suppression of the basic rights of the great majority. Today, that assault is being challenged and may be overcome. One sign of many is the massive refusal to return to the rotten, dangerous, precarious jobs offered to the workforce during the neoliberal class war. The catastrophic "market failure" of environmental destruction is a catalyzing factor.

If that happens, we can hope for — and try to nurture — a revival of core features of labor activism from the early days of the industrial revolution, among them solidarity and internationalism. We're all in this together, not each alone trying to collect as many crumbs as we can for ourselves. That consciousness is essential for survival, at home and abroad.

In particular, there must be an end to provocative confrontations with China and a serious rethinking of the alleged "China threat" — experiences we've been through before with dire consequences, now literally a matter of survival. The U.S. and China will cooperate in approaching the urgent crises of today, or we're doomed.

The choices before us are stark. They cannot be evaded or ignored.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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