

# Chomsky: Biden's Early Agenda Gives Hope, But Activist Pressure Must Not Cease



*Noam Chomsky*

Joe Biden's first months in office have comprised a flurry of actions on the domestic front, including a historic stimulus bill. In this exclusive interview, the celebrated public intellectual Noam Chomsky shares his views on some key policies embraced by the Biden administration. Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona. His latest books are *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (co-authored with Robert Pollin and C. J. Polychroniou; Verso, 2020), *Chomsky for Activists* (Routledge, 2020) and *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance* (Haymarket Books, 2020).

*C.J. Polychroniou: President Joe Biden has been in office for approximately two months now, in the course of which he has signed scores of executive orders meant to reverse the policies of Donald Trump. But he has also managed to pass a huge and ambitious stimulus bill unlike anything seen during peacetime. What's your assessment of Biden's actions so far to deal with the most pressing issues facing U.S. society: namely, the coronavirus pandemic and the pain caused to millions of Americans on account of the pandemic?*

*Noam Chomsky:* Better than I'd anticipated. Considerably so.

The stimulus bill has its flaws, but considering the circumstances, it's an

impressive achievement. The circumstances are a highly disciplined opposition party dedicated to the principle announced years ago by its maximal leader, Mitch McConnell: *If we are not in power, we must render the country ungovernable and block government legislative efforts, however beneficial they might be. Then the consequences can be blamed on the party in power, and we can take over.* It worked well for Republicans in 2009 — with plenty of help from Obama. By 2010, the Democrats lost Congress, and the way was cleared to the 2016 debacle.

There's every reason to suppose that the strategy will be renewed — this time under more complex circumstances. The voting base in the hands of Trump, who shares the objective but differs from McConnell on who will pick up the pieces: McConnell and the donor class, or Trump and the voting base he mobilized, almost half of whom worship him as the messenger God sent to save the country from ... we can fill in our favorite fantasies, but should not overlook the fact that what may sound [ridiculous] has roots in the lives of the victims of the neoliberal globalization of the past 40 years — extended by Trump, apart from some rhetorical flourishes.

In those circumstances, passing a stimulus bill was a major accomplishment. Republicans who favor it, and know that their constituents do, nevertheless voted against it, in lockstep obedience to what the Central Committee determines. Some Democrats insisted on watering it down. But what finally passed has valuable elements, which could be a basis for moving on.

There are huge gaps. The bill surely should have contained an increase in the miserable minimum wage, an utter scandal. But that would have been very difficult in the face of total Republican opposition, along with a few Democrats. And there are other crucial features that are missing. Nevertheless, if the short-term measures on child poverty, income support, medical insurance and other basic needs can be extended, it would be a substantial step toward fulfilling the promise envisioned by such careful observers as Roosevelt Institute President Felicia Wong, [who reflected that](#), "As I see it, both the scale and the direction of the American Rescue Plan break the neoliberal, deficits-and-inflation-come-first mold that has hollowed out our economy for a generation." We haven't seen anything that could elicit such hopes for a long time.

There is also hope in appointments on economic issues. Who would have imagined that a regular contributor to radical economics journals would be appointed to the

Council of Economic Advisers (Heather Boushey), joined by the senior economic adviser of the labor-oriented Economic Policy Institute, (Jared Bernstein)?

Biden's strong support for Amazon workers, and unions generally, is a welcome shift. Nothing like it has been heard from the chambers of power in many years. In a sharp reversal of Trump legislation, the tax changes raise incomes mostly for the poor, not the rich. Economic Policy Institute President Thea Lee summarizes the package by saying that it "will provide crucial support to millions of working families; dramatically reduce the race, gender, and income inequalities that were exacerbated by the crisis; and create the conditions for a truly robust recovery once the virus is under control and people are able to resume normal economic activity." Optimistic, but within reach.

House Democrats have passed other important legislation. H.R. 1 protects voting rights, a critical matter now, with Republicans working overtime to try to block the votes of [people of color] and the poor, recognizing that this is the only way a minority party dedicated to wealth and corporate power can remain viable.

On the labor front, the House passed the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, "[a critical step toward restoring](#) workers' right to organize and bargain collectively," the Economic Policy Institute reports, a fundamental right that "has been eroded for decades as employers exploited weaknesses in the current law." It'll probably be killed by the Senate. Even apart from party loyalty, there is little sympathy for working people in Republican ranks.

But even so, it's a basis for organizing and education. It can be a step toward revitalizing the labor movement, a prime target of the neoliberal project since Reagan and Thatcher, who understood well that working people must be deprived of means to defend themselves from the assault.

Decline of union membership is by now recognized, even in the mainstream, to be a major factor in rising inequality — a phrase that translates to "robbery of the general public by a tiny fraction of super-rich." The Economic Policy Institute has reviewed the facts regularly, most recently in a chart that [graphically demonstrates](#) the remarkable correlation between rising/falling union membership and falling/rising inequality.

More generally, there is a good opportunity to overcome the baleful legacy of Trump's bitterly anti-labor Labor Department, headed by corporate lawyer Eugene Scalia, who used his term in office to [eviscerate worker rights](#), notoriously during the pandemic. Scalia was perfectly chosen for the

transformation of the Republicans to a “working-class party,” as hailed by Marco Rubio and Josh Hawley in a triumph of propaganda, or maybe sheer chutzpah. Michael Regan’s appointment as Environmental Protection Agency administrator should replace corporate greed by science and human welfare in this essential agency, a move toward human decency that in this case is a prerequisite for survival.

It’s easy to find serious omissions and deficiencies in Biden’s programs on the domestic front, but there are signs of hope for emerging from the Trump nightmare and moving on to what really should, what really must be done. The hopes are, however, conditional. The temporary measures of the stimulus on child poverty and many other issues must be made permanent, and improved. Crucially, activist pressure must not cease. The masters of the universe pursue their class war relentlessly, and can only be countered by an aroused public opposition that is no less dedicated to the common good.

*What do you think of Biden’s refusal to cancel \$50,000 in student loans?*

A bad decision. What the realistic options were, I don’t frankly know. Higher education at a high level should be recognized to be a basic right, freely available, as it is elsewhere: in our Mexican neighbor, in rich developed countries like Germany, France, the Nordic countries, and a great many others, with at most nominal fees. As it substantially was in the U.S. when it was a much poorer country than it is today. The postwar GI Bill of Rights provided free education for great numbers of white males who would never have gone to college otherwise. There is no reason why young people of any race should be denied the privilege today.

*In light of the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, Biden has vowed to fight domestic terrorism by passing a new law “that respects free speech and civil liberties.” Does the U.S. need a new domestic terrorism agenda?*

A prior question is whether we should retain the current domestic terrorism agenda. There are strong reasons to question that. And any expansion should be a matter of serious concern. That aside, white supremacist violence is no laughing matter. Through the Trump years, the FBI and other monitors report steadily increasing white supremacist terror, by now covering almost all recorded terror. Armed militias are rampant — Trump’s “tough guys” as he’s admiringly called them. The problems can’t be overlooked, but have to be handled with great

caution and a close eye on the temptations for abuse.

*Biden has proposed a plan to strengthen the middle class by encouraging unionization and collective bargaining, and his recent affirmation of the rights of workers to unionize, which was widely interpreted as support for Amazon workers' rights to organize in Alabama, has spread considerable enthusiasm among progressives. Indeed, Biden's support for unions is in pace with the highly favorable ratings that unions have been receiving in the last couple of years. What's behind the support for unions in the present era?*

One reason is objective reality. The sharp rise in inequality is a growing curse, with extremely harmful effects across the society. As mentioned earlier, it closely tracks decline of unions, for reasons that are well understood. Historically, labor unions have been in the forefront of struggles for justice and rights. They also pioneered the environmental movement, as we've discussed before. Workers' organizations are changing in character with the growth of service and knowledge-based economies. They have shared interests, and foster the values of solidarity and mutual aid on which the hope for a decent future rest. Many unions retain the word "international" in their names. It should not just be a symbol or a dream. The dire challenges we face have no borders. Global heating, pandemics, disarmament will be dealt with internationally, if at all. The same is true of labor rights and human rights more generally. At every level, associations of working people should once again be prominent, if not leading the way, toward a better world.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

Copyright: <https://truthout.org/>

*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.