

# How To Achieve Zero Emissions, Even If The Federal Government Won't Help



Prof.dr. Robert Pollin

With Donald Trump in the White House, the prospects for fighting climate change have never been any bleaker in the US. Yet there are options available to state governments to move forward with the greening of the economy even without federal support. This point is made crystal clear in [two studies](#) produced recently by economist *Robert Pollin* and some of his colleagues at the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for the states of Washington and New York. In this exclusive interview for Truthout, Pollin explains the significance of Green New Deal programs.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Bob, two new studies on fighting climate change have been produced by you and two PERI researchers for the states of New York and Washington. How did these studies come about?*

*Robert Pollin: These were both commissioned studies. For the New York study, the commissioning group was New York Renews, which is a coalition of over 130 organizations in New York State, including labor unions, environmental groups and social justice organizations. For the Washington State study, three important groups within the US labor movement commissioned the study — the United Steelworkers, Washington State Labor Council of the AFL-CIO and the Tony Mazzocchi Center for Health, Safety and Environmental Education (TMC). Tony Mazzocchi was a great visionary labor leader with the [Oil, Chemical and Atomic](#)*

[Workers International Union](#) (OCAW — [which] has since merged into the United Steelworkers), who fought to link the aims of working people with those of environmentalists.

It is not an accident that my co-workers and I were asked to do these similar studies at basically the same time. In both cases, the groups supporting the studies are advancing ambitious green economy programs within their respective states. It is obvious that nothing good on climate change is going to be coming out of the federal government under Trump. It is equally obvious that we can't wait around on climate issues (and many other matters) until somebody less awful gets into the White House. We therefore have to take the most forceful possible actions at the level of state politics. This is what the coalitions are doing in both New York and Washington States.

It is also significant that, with both studies, our priority was to show how a viable climate change project can be completely compatible with — indeed, supportive of — a pro-labor agenda. Trump and others on the right have feasted on the divides between labor and environmentalists, claiming that if you are for the environment, then you have to be against working people and their communities. These studies show in great detail (some might even say excruciating detail) that these Trump claims are flat-out wrong.

I will emphasize though that we have to be very careful in making this case (and thus the excruciating detail in these studies). In particular, there is no getting around that, if we are going to stop burning fossil fuels to produce energy — as we absolutely must to have any chance of stabilizing the climate — the jobs of people in the coal, oil and natural gas industries — along with many other allied sectors of the economy — will be lost over time. We need to forthrightly confront this fact, but then advance beyond it, to develop what Tony Mazzocchi himself termed a “just transition” for workers and communities who will be hurt by the necessary environmental transitions. The overarching point of both of these studies is precisely to show how we can stop burning fossil fuels that produce carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions that are the primary cause of climate change, and to accomplish this in ways that expand job opportunities overall while also creating a just transition for workers and communities that are currently dependent on the fossil fuel industry.

*What exactly are Green New Deal programs, and can they be supported without*

*the involvement of the federal government?*

The basic features of Green New Deal programs are simple. The centerpiece is investment in clean energy — i.e. investments that can dramatically raise energy efficiency levels in buildings, transportation systems and industrial processes; and equally, dramatically expand the supply of clean renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, geothermal, small-scale hydro and clean bioenergy. Raising energy efficiency levels and expanding the supply of clean renewable energy will enable economies to end their dependency on fossil fuel energy over time, and thus drive down CO2 emissions to zero. These investments will also be a major new source of job creation wherever these investments are made, including New York and Washington States, but equally in other places.

At what levels do these investment programs need to be mounted in order for high efficiency and clean renewable energy to supplant fossil fuel dependency over the next few decades? As we show in these studies and elsewhere, the needed level of investment amounts to about 1.5 percent of the overall level of economy activity — that is, GDP — within virtually all economies. That ends up being a lot of money — for example, about \$30 billion per year in public and private investment in New York State, and about \$7 billion per year in Washington State. But keep in mind that while these are indeed very large sums of money, they still only represent about 1.5 percent of each state's annual GDP. That means that 98.5 percent of the state's economy can proceed as it would otherwise, while we are channeling 1.5 percent of state's resources into the Green New Deal project that will significantly support climate stabilization.

It would, of course, be easier to raise this level of investment funds in both New York and Washington States, and elsewhere, if the federal government was supporting the project — as was being done to a significant, if not adequate extent under Obama. But that's not the world we are living in now. So, we have to fight to advance these Green New Deal projects right now, in the existing political environment, as best we can. I am very impressed by the work being done by both the coalitions in New York and Washington States. I am looking forward to their success.

*For the state of Washington, the aim is to reduce carbon dioxide by 40 percent in comparison to 2014 levels. How can this target be achieved, and what do you think will be its impact on the environment, given that it will be a localized effort*

*to combat climate change?*

The Washington State program aims to reduce CO2 emissions by 40 percent as of 2035 relative to 2014. This can happen through the clean energy investment program of raising energy efficiency standards and expanding the supply of clean renewable energy.

I should emphasize that through investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy, neither businesses nor households should ever have to pay more for energy as the economy transitions out of fossil fuels. This is because energy efficiency investments, by definition, save money for consumers. Meanwhile, the average costs of wind, geothermal, small-scale hydro and clean bioenergy are already at rough cost parity with fossil fuels. Solar energy is still a bit more expensive, but its costs are coming down rapidly. It was also notable that, amid the Trump/ Republican Congress's loathsome tax bill that passed in December, they did not cut the subsidy for investments in solar energy. That investment tax credit will continue to support the rapid expansion of the solar industry.

Now, of course, all of these investments in Washington State will only lower emission in Washington State. Meanwhile, climate change must be addressed not only at the local level, or even the national level. It is a global issue. But we must fight for victories every single place until we get those victories. We at PERI are working, or have worked in the past, on Green New Deal projects in other places, including the US overall, China, India, sub-Saharan Africa, Spain, Brazil, South Korea, South Africa, Germany, Indonesia and Puerto Rico. The same basic principles work everywhere, after adjusting for local conditions, of course.

*Will such a program have beneficial effects for the economy as a whole?*

The investment program for Washington State will expand overall job opportunities in the state by an average of about 40,000 jobs per year. It will also be fully compatible with a healthy economic growth rate for the state, since, as mentioned above, the costs of energy will not rise on average.

*One of the aims of the study for the state of New York is to reduce emissions to zero level by 2050, which is in line with recent UN reports that we must reduce emissions to zero by 2070 in order to avoid global warming of more than 2 degrees Celsius. Do you feel that the political climate in the US is conducive to such bold undertakings on the climate change front?*

I can't claim to be an expert prognosticator of what politics will allow in New York State, or the US overall, between now and 2050. What we do show in the study is that driving down CO2 emissions to zero in New York State by 2050 is entirely feasible, both technically and economically. As with Washington State, we show that the clean energy investment project that will be the foundation of a zero-emission New York State by 2050 will be a net source of job creation, creating roughly 150,000 jobs per year through 2030, then about 100,000 jobs per year until 2050. We show that this clean energy investment project will not deter New York State from enjoying a healthy overall rate of economic growth, even as the economy transitions over the next 30 years into one with zero emissions. Moreover, we develop specific proposals for supporting both the workers and communities that are currently dependent on the fossil fuel industry, to minimize the negative impact on these workers and communities from the year-by-year contraction, leading to the total shutdown of the fossil fuel industry in New York State.

Given these features of the Green New Deal project for New York State — just as with that for Washington State — there should be, in principle, overwhelming support for this project. Now, of course we know that fossil fuel companies will fight these programs relentlessly, with all the various tricks they have, and with the enormous amounts of money they are prepared to spend to defend their sources of big-time profits. They are not about to throw in the towel. Everyone must realize that.

But organizers have to be equally wary of Democratic Party policymakers who give strong support in rhetoric, and even some support in actual policies, though nothing close to what is adequate to meet the challenges we face. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is a perfect case in point here. Thus, Cuomo was powerful in denouncing President Trump's decision last June to pull out of the 2015 Paris Global Climate Summit agreement. Cuomo also strongly reaffirmed at that time his administration's commitments to climate stabilization policies. His administration's policies are in fact quite good on paper, very much in line with those of New York Renews. But Cuomo has consistently been unwilling to match his rhetoric with a level of financial and regulatory commitment that will deliver on these stated goals.

The response here is simple to state, if difficult to achieve: We simply have to defeat these people and their interests — both the outright opponents among the

fossil fuel giants and liberal policymakers who talk a good game, but are unwilling to commit to policies that will deliver on their promises. Getting victories against both sets of forces will require huge amounts of very effective organizing. I am confident that New York Renews in New York State and the coalition led by the Steelworkers and the State Labor Council in Washington State are ready to take on the challenge and succeed. I also look forward to their successes inspiring similar efforts and successes throughout the rest of the US.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

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