

# Noam Chomsky And Robert Pollin: If We Want A Future, Green New Deal Is Key



Noam Chomsky

Climate change is by far the most serious crisis facing the world today. At stake is the future of civilization as we know it. Yet, both public awareness and government action lag way behind what's needed to avert a climate change catastrophe. In the interview below, *Noam Chomsky* and *Robert Pollin* discuss the challenges ahead and what needs to be done.

Noam Chomsky is Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at MIT and Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona. Robert Pollin is Distinguished University Professor of Economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Chomsky, Pollin and Polychroniou are co-authors of a book on climate change and the Green New Deal, forthcoming with Verso in Spring 2020.



Robert Pollin - Photo: UMass

Amherst

*C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, let me start with you and ask you to share your thoughts about the uniqueness of the climate change crisis.*

*Noam Chomsky:* History is all too rich in records of horrendous wars, indescribable torture, massacres and every imaginable abuse of fundamental rights. But the threat of destruction of organized human life in any recognizable or tolerable form — that is entirely new. The environmental crisis under way is indeed unique in human history, and is a true existential crisis. Those alive today will decide the fate of humanity — and the fate of the other species that we are now destroying at a rate not seen for 65 million years, when a huge asteroid hit the earth, ending the age of the dinosaurs and opening the way for some small mammals to evolve to pose a similar threat to life on earth as that earlier asteroid, though differing from it in that we can make a choice.

Meanwhile the world watches as we proceed toward a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. We are approaching perilously close to the global temperatures of 120,000 years ago, when sea levels were 6-9 meters higher than today. Glaciers are sliding into the sea five times faster than in the 1990s, with more than 100 meters of ice thickness lost in some areas due to ocean warming, and current losses doubling every decade. Complete loss of the ice sheets would raise sea levels by about five meters, drowning coastal cities, and with utterly devastating effects elsewhere — the low-lying plains of Bangladesh for example. This is only one of the many concerns of those who are paying attention to what is happening before our eyes.

Climate scientists are certainly paying close attention, and issuing dire warnings. Israeli climatologist Baruch Rinkevich [captures](#) the general mood succinctly: *After us, the deluge, as the saying goes. People don't fully understand what we're talking about here.... They don't understand that everything is expected to change: the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the landscapes we see, the oceans, the seasons, the daily routine, the quality of life. Our children will have to adapt or become extinct.... That's not for me. I'm happy I won't be here.*

Yet, just at the time when all must act together, with dedication, to confront humanity's "ultimate challenge," the leaders of the most powerful state in human

history, in full awareness of what they are doing, are dedicating themselves with passion to destroying the prospects for organized human life.

*With rare exceptions, the mainstream political establishment in the United States continues to look the other way when it comes to climate change. Why is that?*

*Chomsky:* Both political parties have drifted right during the neoliberal years, much as in Europe. The Democratic establishment is now more or less what would have been called “moderate Republicans” some years ago. The Republicans have gone off the spectrum. Comparative studies show that they rank alongside of fringe rightwing parties in Europe in their general positions. They are, furthermore, the only major conservative party to reject anthropogenic climate change, as already mentioned: a global anomaly. Two respected political analysts of the American Enterprise Institute, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, describe the Republican Party since Newt Gingrich’s takeover in the ‘90s as not a normal political party but a “radical insurgency” that has largely abandoned parliamentary politics. Under McConnell’s leadership, that has only become more evident — but he has ample company in Republican Party circles.

The positions of the leadership on climate surely influence the attitudes of Republican Party loyalists. [Only about 25 percent of Republicans](#) (36 percent of the more savvy millennials) recognize that humans are responsible for global warming. Shocking figures.

And in the ranking of urgent issues among Republicans, global warming (if it is even assumed to be taking place), is almost undetectable.

It is considered outrageous to assert that the Republican Party is the most dangerous organization in human history. Perhaps so, but in the light of the stakes, what else can one rationally conclude?

*Bob,* the Green New Deal is seen as perhaps the only viable solution to avert a climate change catastrophe of the sort described by Noam above, yet many continue to regard it as unrealistic, not only from a purely economic perspective (the claim is that it is simply unaffordable), but also in the sense that modern economies and societies cannot function without fossil fuel energy. First, is the Green New Deal a detailed policy proposal to move us away from a climate change catastrophe, and, second, is it realistic?

*Robert Pollin:* The Green New Deal has gained tremendous traction as an

organizing framework over the past year. This alone is a major achievement. But it is still imperative that we transform this big idea into a viable program. In my view, putting meat on the bones of the Green New Deal starts with a single simple idea: We have to absolutely stop burning oil, coal and natural gas to produce energy within the next 30 years at most; and we have to do this in a way that also [supports](#) rising living standards and expanding opportunities for working people and the poor throughout the world.

This version of a Green New Deal program is, in fact, entirely realistic in terms of its purely economic and technical features. Clean renewable energy sources — including solar, wind, geothermal and to a lesser extent small-scale hydro and low emissions bioenergy — are already either at cost parity with fossil fuels and nuclear or they are cheaper. In addition, the single easiest and cheapest way to lower emissions is to raise energy efficiency standards, through, among other measures, retrofitting existing buildings; making new buildings operate as net zero energy consumers; and replacing gas-guzzler cars with expanding public transportation and electric cars. Energy efficiency measures, by definition, will save people money — for example, your home electricity bills could realistically be cut in half without having to reduce the amount that you light, heat or cool your house. So, the Green New Deal will not cost consumers anything over time, as long as we solve the actually quite simple problem of funding Green New Deal investments through the cost savings we gain by raising efficiency standards and producing cheap renewable energy. My coworkers and I have estimated that building a 100 percent clean energy system will require about 2.5 percent of global GDP per year for roughly the next 30 years. Yes, that's a lot of money in dollar terms, like about \$2 trillion in 2021 and rising thereafter. But it does still mean that 97.5 percent of global economic activity can be devoted to things other than investments in clean energy.

So, absolutely, the Green New Deal can be a realistic global climate stabilization project. More specifically, the Green New Deal is capable of hitting the necessary emissions reduction targets for stabilization at a global average temperature of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2100, as set out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last October. However, the real question, of course, is not whether the Green New Deal is economically or technically feasible, but rather whether it is politically feasible. On this question, Noam is of course exactly on point in asking: Are we, the human race, going to

allow ourselves to become the 21st-century asteroid clone or not?

*What about the claim that a transition to 100 percent renewable energy will result in the permanent loss of millions of good-paying jobs?*

*Pollin:* In fact, clean energy investments will be a major source of new job creation, in all regions of the globe. The critical factor is that clean energy investments will create a lot more jobs than maintaining the existing dirty energy infrastructure — in the range of two to four times more jobs per dollar of spending in all countries that we have studied, including Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Spain and the United States. Of course, jobs that are tied to the fossil fuel industry will be eliminated. The affected workers and their communities must be supported through generous Just Transition measures, including guaranteeing workers' pensions, moving people into new jobs without losing incomes, and investing in impacted communities, in a range of projects. Land reclamation is just one such investment opportunity, including cleaning up abandoned coal mines and converting the residual coal ash into useful products, like paper. I can't emphasize enough that, throughout the world, ["just transition" programs](#) must be understood as absolutely central to the Green New Deal.

*Noam, how do we increase public awareness about the need for government action vis-à-vis climate change?*

*Chomsky:* The simple answer is: work harder. There are no new special tricks. We know what the message is. We know the barriers that have to be overcome. We have to find ways to shape the message, in words and actions, so as to overcome the barriers.

The message is two-fold: First, we're facing an existential crisis that must be dealt with quickly; and second, there are ways to overcome it.

The first part is expressed simply enough in current articles in the most prestigious and reliable journals. Oxford professor of physics Raymond Pierrehumbert, a lead author of the recent IPCC report, opens [his review of existing circumstances and options](#) by writing: "Let's get this on the table right away, without mincing words. With regard to the climate crisis, yes, it's time to panic.... We are in deep trouble." He then lays out the details carefully and scrupulously, reviewing the possible technical fixes and their very serious problems, concluding, "There's no plan B." We must move to zero net carbon

emissions, and fast.

The second part is spelled out in convincing detail in Bob's work, briefly reviewed [here](#).

The message must be conveyed in ways that do not induce despair and resignation among those inclined to accept it, and do not evoke resentment, anger and even greater rejection among those who do not accept what is in fact becoming overwhelmingly clear.

In the latter case, it is necessary to understand the reasons — perhaps rejection of science altogether, or adopting economists' preference for market-based solutions which, whatever one thinks of them, are completely on the wrong time-scale, or the great many who expect the Second Coming, or those who think we will be rescued by some unknown technology or great figure, perhaps the colossus [perceived](#) by scholars at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, whose "spirit seems to stride the country, watching us like a warm and friendly ghost" (Ronald Reagan).

The task will not be easy. It must be undertaken, urgently. By words and by actions, such as those being undertaken in the climate strikes of September 2019.

*Bob, what will it take for the labor movement as a whole to come around and embrace the Green New Deal vision?*

*Pollin:* The Green New Deal has been gaining major [support in the labor movement](#) for several years now. There is still a long way to go, but progress is evident. For example, the coalition in Washington State that advanced a Green New Deal proposition in the 2018 election cycle was led by the visionary then president of the state AFL-CIO, Jeff Johnson. In the end, the initiative was defeated when oil companies flooded the airwaves with \$30 million of virulent propaganda in the weeks before the November election. Similar initiatives are now being advanced in Colorado, again led by the state's mainstream labor leaders.

Of course, we need to very quickly advance beyond just these few shining examples. What is critical here is that the climate movement must be firmly committed to a just transition as one component of the Green New Deal that is of equal significance with all the others. The climate movement needs to also be clear on the point that building the clean energy economy will be supportive of



increasing job opportunities and rising living standards, as I am convinced it can be.

There is no reason that the Green New Deal needs to be associated with austerity economic policies in any way. To the contrary, clean energy investments will create new opportunities for a wide range of small-scale public, cooperative, and private ownership forms. You don't need massive mining projects, pipelines or exploration platforms to deliver clean energy. Solar panels on roofs and in parking lots and wind turbines on farms can, by themselves, get us reasonably far along in meeting the energy needs of a growing egalitarian economy. From this perspective, the Green New Deal should rightfully be seen as offering a fully viable alternative to austerity economics along with the only realistic path for keeping us from becoming the 21st-century asteroid clone.

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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.