

# Organizers Are Demanding A Green New Deal For The Gulf South



*Jesse George - New Orleans Policy Director for the Alliance for Affordable Energy. Photo: <https://www.all4energy.org>*

The Gulf Coast is home to “over 47% of total petroleum refining capacity ... as well as 51% of total U.S. natural gas processing plant capacity,” [according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration](#). Given that the burning of fossil fuels is the primary cause of the climate crisis, the Gulf Coast is a primary site driving global warming — and revealing its impacts. Extreme weather has become quite common in the entire region and sea levels are expected to rise between 14 and 18 inches by 2050, [according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#).

In this context, the Green New Deal project proposed by progressive activists and lawmakers carries special weight for sustainability in the Gulf Coast. Much of the Gulf South region of the United States — Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida — is politically conservative, which means the fight against the fossil-fuel economy is a truly uphill battle. Nonetheless, activism for transformative change is quite widespread throughout the Gulf Coast region. There are hundreds of organizations in the region committed to the fight against the climate crisis, even though they may not be nationally known and surely do not get the attention

they deserve from corporate-owned media.

The [Gulf South for a Green New Deal](#) (GS4GND) is a regional formation of some 300 organizations working towards climate, racial, and economic justice across the Gulf South. It was launched in May 2019, with hundreds of attendees representing tribal nations, neighborhood associations, student groups and community organizations. A few months later, GS4GND produced a policy platform outlining what a Green New Deal should entail in order to be successful in the Gulf South.

On June 4, people from across the Gulf Coast will gather in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for the [Gulf Gathering for Climate Justice and Joy](#). Ahead of this event, *Truthout* interviewed Jesse George, the New Orleans Policy Director for the Alliance for Affordable Energy. In the interview below, George discusses the importance of organizing and the need for a just transition in the Gulf Coast. He also explains the obstacles facing organizers in their fight against the powerful corporate interests entrenched in the Gulf South. This fight draws inspiration from the “rich legacy of liberation” in the region, George noted.

*C. J. Polychroniou: What would a just transition look like in the Gulf South?*

*Jesse George:* For generations the fossil fuel industry has degraded our land, air, and water across the Gulf South. As we face stronger and more frequent storms, ever accelerating land loss, and the compounding effects of climate change, it is critical that we transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a renewable energy future that prioritizes the needs of Gulf South residents, especially the Black and Indigenous communities who have paid most dearly in this extractive economy.

Across the region, corporate interests have told Gulf South residents that they have but two choices — surrender their resources to industry in exchange for promised (but never realized) prosperity or risk complete economic destruction. And now, as we seek to protect our homes and communities from the worsening impacts of climate change, polluters are ready with another set of lies that could cost us our lives — dangerous and unproven technologies backed by false promises like carbon capture and biomass. The truth is that polluting industries have offered little in the way of economic security and their latest scheme to continue extracting the region’s resources will do nothing but line the pockets of the very executives responsible for polluting our land, air and waterways.

But a just transition — one that uplifts the workers and fenceline communities that have shouldered the burdens of the petrochemical industry — is possible and presents tremendous opportunities here in Louisiana and the entire Gulf South. For example, Louisiana has long been known as an energy state, and that doesn't have to change. We just have to change the ways we make that energy. Across the Gulf South there is tremendous potential for offshore wind, and yet we've seen practically no development. The infrastructure and workforce that currently services offshore oil rigs could easily be transitioned to installing and maintaining offshore wind turbines. A just transition means paying for job training so that those workers can make the transition to the renewable energy future. We have a duty to ensure the economic benefits of the new renewable energy economy don't just flow upwards but benefit the people who have suffered most severely from the impacts of the extractive economy.

And finally, a just transition means building climate resistant communities. Last year Hurricane Ida, one of the strongest hurricanes in recorded history, ripped through south Louisiana before making its way northward retaining enough strength to flood New York City subways. Our energy grid failed and folks were left for weeks, even months, without power in extreme heat. People died. Renewable energy, particularly local solar where folks are equipped with panels and batteries that feed into microgrids, could save lives in an event like this. We have the technology. We just need to build the political power to transform our economy.

*Why is it important to organize as a region? What unites the region?*

The Gulf and other waterways literally connect our region like the circulatory system in a human body. We share many of the same struggles — from extractive petrochemical industries to continual climate disaster, to the fight against the false solution of carbon capture. If we share the same struggles, we should stand shoulder to shoulder in facing them. For too long our region has been treated as a sacrifice zone by industry and our elected officials are all too ready to auction off our resources to the highest bidder.

Two years ago, a pipe carrying compressed carbon dioxide ruptured in Yazoo County, Mississippi, a majority Black county. The burst pipe filled the area with noxious gas and sent people to the hospital. What happened in our neighboring state could be a tragic harbinger of what's to come to other parts of the region if

we fail to stop the false promise that is carbon capture. The whole idea of carbon capture and storage is an industry lie. There is no evidence that long-term carbon capture and underground storage works. The few completed carbon capture projects aren't removing carbon from the air, they're capturing just a small percentage of the carbon a facility is actively emitting. In the instances where the carbon capture projects have not failed completely, they have come nowhere close to their touted carbon capture goals.

And yet, Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards and President Joe Biden are rallying behind carbon capture technology and essentially signing a permission slip for polluting industries to continue business as usual. It is essential that we stand in solidarity with residents from across the Gulf South to share knowledge and ensure that industry can't shuffle false promises from one place to another. The health of our region depends on our ability to work together to secure a just climate future.

*What obstacles do organizers in the Gulf South face?*

Petrochemical and extractive industries have a vise-grip on the Gulf South. The idea of our region being a sacrifice zone becomes self-fulfilling as industrial expansion continues unabated. Those who would maintain the status quo have a lot of money and power. They have bought off politicians from both major parties.

The corporate interests fighting to maintain the status quo are entrenched and they've been spreading lies for generations. For years, they've convinced us that we have no choice but to surrender our resources to them. Industry has done a very thorough job of scaring people. They've scared everyday people into thinking these extractive industries are the only source of steady employment in the region. Furthermore, industry has our elected leaders shaking in their boots too afraid that hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign donations will be turned against them should officials have the nerve to stand up to polluters.

And these extractive industries have maintained this multi-generation scare campaign on lies. They've told us they're the only economic option for the region. They've told us industry isn't responsible for elevated cancer risks and other poor health outcomes. They've told us that their ill-fated plans to capture the very emissions they create and pump them underground is safe. And now they're telling us complete lies about renewable energy options that could employ

thousands and drastically reduce carbon emissions. The oil and gas and petrochemical industries don't want to cede control of our region and they're not going to let it go easily.

*The Gulf Gathering for Climate Justice and Joy is free and open to the public including folks who may not already be involved in the climate fight, so what do you hope attendees leave with?*

We want attendees to leave the gathering with a sense of hope and a vision for the future of our region where human life and health are valued above corporate profits. We hope attendees will leave with an understanding that a just and joyous climate future is possible through our collective action.

So many forces in our contemporary society are at work to atomize people — from the gig economy where everybody's got their own hustle to society's movement away from shared workspace to the isolation of internet culture. For the last two years, we've been even more isolated as a result of the pandemic. There's a lot to keep people apart from each other and when people are forced apart it's only natural that we feel powerless. Our hope is that in coming together at the gathering folks will feel their power and see that change is possible. We want folks to know they're not alone in knowing that things need to change and we want them to find an organizing home in Gulf South for a Green New Deal.

*How does the gathering fit into the legacy of resistance in the Gulf South?*

Our region is home of the Civil Rights movement; the German Coast Uprising, the largest rebellion of enslaved people in U.S. history; Native resistance; marronage; anti-colonial efforts; and more. Throughout history, our ancestors have stood up to oppressive systems. Gulf South for a Green New Deal, as a Black- and Indigenous-led formation, draws on that rich legacy of liberation.

And like movements before, ours is centered in joy and hope for a brighter future.

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integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, 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 scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).