



THE SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL
CRISIS IN TIMES OF THE PANDEMIC:

DISCUSSING A GREEN NEW DEAL



tricontinental
Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

An earlier version of this notebook was published by the Argentina office of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research in September 2020; the data that follows corresponds to the date of the original publication. It was edited and subsequently translated into English and Portuguese in June–July 2022.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Fernando González	
 Socioenvironmental Alternatives in the Face of the Pandemic and the Crisis: Discussing the Green New Deal	 7
José Seoane	
 The Ecosocialist Green New Deal in the US: An Interview with Thea Riofrancos	 16
 An Ecosocialist Vision for Decarbonisation in Latin America	 24
Sabrina Fernandes	

Introduction

Fernando González is a member of the Research Collective on Socio-Environmental Crisis and Dispossession of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (Argentina) and a researcher and faculty member at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) of the University of Buenos Aires.

‘We must come running, since the future is crumbling.’

– Silvio Rodriguez, *The Times Are Giving Birth to a Heart* (*La era está pariendo un corazón*)

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on how the transformation of the environment is central to the spread of viruses and the spawning of pandemics. Reflections on a post-pandemic agenda are an opportunity to attach greater importance to issues that are generally pushed to the margins of the public agenda. These issues are among the systemic causes of the health crisis as well as of the food, energy, and climate crises. Some social and political forces have managed to raise doubts about the dynamics of multinational agribusiness, which drives intensive and industrial livestock production that creates the conditions for viruses to mutate and then spread to humans, while other issues have not yet been addressed in the post-COVID debates.

The relationship between agribusiness, deforestation, and the climate crisis is among the issues that have received attention. As we saw in August 2021, forest fires were once again in the news. This was the case not only in Argentina, or even in the region as a whole (with the fires in the Pantanal and across the Amazon), but practically all over the world.

In the Arctic, temperatures once again exceeded 30°C, causing even more fires. Tropical forests of the sub-Saharan region in Africa burned while Asia and Oceania suffered major wildfires and California (United States), as well as European countries such as Spain, France, and Greece, battled fires of varying magnitude.

By adopting a long-term perspective, we can identify the relationship between these phenomena and the climate crisis. The journal *Nature* published a study indicating that fire weather seasons have lengthened across 29.6 million km² (25.3%) of the Earth's vegetated surface, resulting in an 18.7% increase in the global mean fire weather season length from 1979 to 2013.¹ This phenomenon is due to the increase in weather variables that the system itself has altered (temperatures, humidity, total precipitation, and wind speed). The increase in wildfires in turn feeds back into the climate crisis that causes them. This exposes us to the risk of releasing viruses buried by the cold temperatures of the Arctic ice (permafrost) and makes it more likely that diseases linked to the change in temperatures (dengue, Zika, etc.) will emerge.

It is in this context that debates on the necessary adaptation to climate change emerge. These debates are being addressed across the world with different approaches and models by international organisations and by some nation states. At the global level, we hear talk of the European Green Deal, the North American Green New Deal, and the Global Green New Deal. Latin America is beginning to speak both in these terms as well as of the Ecosocial Pact or the Ecosocial Plan, different narratives that contribute to the same discussion. In Argentina, the discussion even extends to sectors of the national government, which are seeking to address issues such as the energy transition and commitment to 'green' industrialisation. Popular movements and different civil society actors have begun to debate the implications of this policy framework. Those whose working and living conditions are changing are immersed in this debate, including socio-environmental movements, peasant and farmers' movements, trade unions, and committed researchers who have forged a rich experience of alternative practices and programmes. Lastly,

¹ W. Matt Jolly, Mark A. Cochrane, Patrick H. Freeborn., et al., 'Climate-Induced Variations in Global Wildfire Danger from 1979 to 2013', *Nature*, 14 July 2015. <https://www.nature.com/articles/ncomms8537>

some of the central concepts addressed by these debates are also part of other proposals. This is the case with the *Plan de Desarrollo Humano Integral* ('Comprehensive Human Development Plan'), which was presented by a group of social movements and trade union organisations and includes ecological transition as a central overarching concept. We believe that this publication can contribute to these debates.

It is in this vein that the Research Collective on Socio-Environmental Crisis and Dispossession of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (Argentina) decided to produce this notebook. We consider it to be an initial approach aimed at gathering different opinions from those who are immersed in the discussion and initiatives surrounding these issues, particularly on the meanings and effects of the so-called Green New Deal and the debates that arise from it. For this reason, we invited Thea Riofrancos (United States) and Sabrina Fernandes (Brazil) to participate as leading figures in the field of ecosocialism in their respective countries and included an article by researcher and activist José Seoane, a member of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and this collective. We thank them for participating with their thoughts and hope that these texts serve to strengthen the essential debates for the collective production of revolutionary theories and practices.



Socioenvironmental Alternatives in the Face of the Pandemic and the Crisis: Discussing the Green New Deal

José Seoane is a sociologist and doctor of social sciences, professor at the School of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), researcher at the Institute of Latin American and Caribbean Studies (IEALC), and member of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. Among other works, he has published: Extractivismo, despojo y crisis climática [Extractivism, Dispossession and Climate Crisis] (2013, co-author); Las (re)configuraciones neoliberales de la cuestión ambiental [Neoliberal (Re) Configurations of the Environmental Question] (2017); and, as a co-editor, La potencia de la vida frente a la producción de muerte. El proyecto neoliberal y las resistencias [The Neoliberal Project and Resistance] (2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened – in some cases dramatically – the multiple dynamics of the crisis of civilisation that has characterised the spread of capitalist neoliberalisation in recent decades. At the same time, the gravity of the health, social, and economic situation has exposed the catastrophic effects of these same policies on the health and precarisation of life for working-class sectors. The spread of the virus and the re-emergence of the threat of death as a population management issue – in addition to the attempts to naturalise these processes in biological terms – draw public attention to the socioenvironmental conditions and the forms that the reproduction of social relations and life adopt when faced with the threat of commodification and dispossession. An examination of the repeated cycles of epidemics and pandemics that have affected nations and regions in recent decades points precisely to these processes. The neoliberal production of food and the destructive effects of

contemporary extractivism on native forests and jungles are particularly responsible for these cycles.

In both respects, the debate over the real causes of the current crisis and the alternatives to it emphasises the significance of the socioenvironmental question and perspective. In a way, this has appeared in the practices of popular movements and their responses to the health and social catastrophe that is affecting the subaltern subjects of Latin America.² These movements have once again taken up and brought life to the programmes of popular ecology and *buen vivir* ('living well'), which marked the most pivotal cycles of popular struggles and rebellions in the region.³

Similarly, the proposal for a Green New Deal has re-emerged and taken on new relevance as part of the debate on public policy alternatives. The term New Deal alludes to the socioeconomic policy developed by US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1933 onwards in response to the effects of the Wall Street stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. This policy was characterised by strong state intervention in the economy aimed at mitigating the effects of mass unemployment and the social crisis as well as reviving economic activity through public sector employment, social policies, and stimulation of consumption. Combined with other measures, we could say that this policy was a form of Keynesianism years before Keynes published his General Theory.⁴

The current addition of 'green' to this term is generally understood as a way of highlighting the need to consider the ecological dimension of this economic recovery, stimulated through state intervention and public investment. The dissemination and use that the term Green New Deal

² Translator's note: In this text, *Nuestra America*, or 'Our America', is translated as Latin America. *Nuestra América* is a concept stemming from Cuban national hero Jose Martí's 1891 essay on Latin American nationalism calling for unity among nations to foment a Pan-Latin American identity opposed to the cultural values of Europe and the United States

³ Translator's note: *ecología popular* or 'popular ecology' focuses on defending community access to natural resources in the face of market-led depredation. Examples of this have been developed in India, Kenya, Brazil, Malaysia, and other developing countries. Many of these struggles have at their core the defence of their own natural resources against depredation by corporate giants in the North or in their own country.

⁴ Translator's note: General theory refers to John Maynard Keynes' book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936).

has acquired in our circles indeed raises a question about the current and future effects of considering and restricting our scope of change to this perspective. In addition, it leads us to consider the significance and consequences that this could have for the Global South and the peoples of Latin America, especially when it comes to the challenges faced by the subaltern sectors of the population and their central role in constructing alternatives for social transformation that are so urgent today. Responding to these questions undoubtedly begins with an awareness of the discursive and extra-discursive framework in which the notion of the Green New Deal emerged as well as an awareness of the different meanings and implications that it had and has. This article aims to offer some reflections on this subject in particular.

A Green New Deal with a History

One of the first iterations of the Green New Deal leads us to the work prepared by the environmental economist Edward Barbier in 2009, commissioned by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in the context of the international economic crisis that has been unfolding since 2008. This report, entitled ‘Global Green New Deal’, argued that ‘an investment of one percent of the global GDP over the next two years’ – equivalent to a quarter of the total size of the fiscal stimulus packages proposed at the time to deal with the crisis – ‘could provide the critical mass of green infrastructure needed to seed a significant greening of the global economy’. The proposal was to redirect part of the public investment announced internationally to promote green economic activities which would ‘make a major contribution to reviving the world economy, saving and creating jobs, and protecting vulnerable groups’ and simultaneously ‘promote sustainable and inclusive growth’. This was an initiative in favour of ‘the active “greening” of proposed fiscal stimulus packages’.⁵ Indeed, at first glance these objectives do not appear to be far removed from the meaning that the Green New Deal proposal has adopted in many cases today, when it is in the midst of the crises sparked or deepened by COVID-19.

⁵ Edward Barbier, ‘Global Green New Deal’, *United Nations Environment Programme*, March 2009, p. 1. https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7903/A_Global_Green_New_Deal_Policy_Brief.pdf?amp%3BisAllowed=&sequence=3

Barbier's proposal, which was adopted and promoted by UNEP from that moment onwards, was part of the 'green economy'. Barbier himself had been part of the team led by David Pearce, which included Anil Markandya and which wrote the 1989 report that would become the first consistent expression of this proposal, published in the same year as the book *Blueprint for a Green Economy*.⁶ The green economy was presented as the solution to a series of clashes and contradictions that had cut across environmental debates and policies since the 1970s and 1990s and that created a false dichotomy between economic development and the economy on the one hand and the conservation and protection of nature on the other. This contrast between the economy and nature – which shaped discussions about the socioenvironmental question during those years – thus appeared to have been overcome by integrating nature into the economy. Addressing the environmental question was thus reduced to promoting certain economic activities considered to be 'green' to the detriment of other activities considered to be harmful to the environment. As has been pointed out many times, the green economy meant reconsidering how the environmental question is handled solely by modifying the distribution of different forms of capital. In other words, there would be a shift from favouring the 'brown' economy to prioritising the 'green' economy, thus reconfirming the rationality of profit, competition, and the market, as well as capitalist social relations themselves, and ultimately making caring for the environment a way of doing good business.

When it comes to the global debate about how to approach the environmental question, the proposals of the Global Green New Deal and the green economy and their adoption by UNEP represented an attempt to reformulate and overcome the reference to sustainable development that continued to guide the agreements of international agencies in those years. This would mean accepting some kind of regulation or limitation of economic activity with the aim of preserving nature and reproducing natural capital. As witnessed in the debates preceding and during Rio+20, also known as the Earth Summit 2012, promoting the green economy became the new neoliberal paradigm for dealing with the environmental question. It is no coincidence that this took place alongside a renewed

⁶ David Pearce, Anil Markandya, and Edward Barbier, *Blueprint for a Green Economy* (London: Earthscan, 1989).

offensive for the transnational appropriation of natural resources and the deepening of extractivism during those same years in Latin America.

The Echoes and Challenges of the Green New Deal in Latin America

Once the Green New Deal was launched, references to it spread alongside neoliberal crises, even reaching progressive and critical sectors in the United States and Europe. The worsening dynamics of the climate crisis, with its catastrophic prospects and the growing importance of its present effects – as seen in the intensification and spread of extreme weather phenomena – meant that addressing this dimension of the socioenvironmental question became a central issue even for the world's elites. On simply rereading the latest reports of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – a body thought to be politically impartial – one can grasp the terrifying panorama that the immediate future holds for us if significant change is not implemented. At the same time, data provided by the World Meteorological Organisation shows that, while environmental agreements and policies have progressed in recent decades, the presence of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has simultaneously persisted.

Just as there was a bourgeois concern with the preservation of nature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, today there are different traditions of liberal or even neoliberal environmentalism. In this context, the gravity of the climate crisis has also been one of the focal points of the disputes between different factions of the global elites and even within the US itself. For example, the policy of denial of the anthropogenic causes of climate change advocated by former US President Donald Trump as well as his decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Accords goes against the policy promoted by his predecessor, Barack Obama, who had been in favour of those agreements and the promotion of renewable energy and the green economy. These agreements and policies were questioned by popular movements. Ever since Al Gore promoted the campaign against climate change as vice president under Bill Clinton (1993–2001), for which he even received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, leading sectors of the Democratic Party have adopted this proposal for a 'green deal'. The recent work of Jeremy Rifkin (adviser to Al Gore) was precisely entitled *The Green New Deal*.

Although Rifkin is best known for his 1995 book *The End of Work*, his aforementioned book *The Green New Deal* recognises the threat of a sixth extinction of life on Earth and the importance of mobilising young people around these issues. Rifkin concludes with a call for a bold economic plan to ensure the effective transition from a civilisation based on fossil fuels to one based on the use of renewable energy. The proposed shift is based on the fact that renewable energy has become an increasingly attractive and profitable business, indicating, as Rifkin wrote, that ‘The marketplace is speaking, and governments will need to adapt if they are to survive and prosper’.

It is in this context that the Argentine province of Córdoba, the heart of agribusiness, hosted the first two Latin American summits on the green economy in 2016 and 2017, organised by the Advanced Leadership Foundation, a US organisation linked to the Democratic Party. As Córdoba’s governor, Juan Schiaretti, clearly noted in the inauguration of the Second Green Economy Summit, ‘nowhere is it written that care for the environment is at odds... with productive development... [I]t’s time that both merge... as there are business opportunities in the sustainable economy... [T]he number of green economy companies in the US itself is proving... that it is absolutely compatible and profitable for the business sector... to work in the green economy’.⁷ Obama’s presence at that second summit indicated the imperialist corporate interest in this initiative, while the participation of then President Mauricio Macri and many of his officials demonstrated its influence on his government’s neoliberal policy.

This is the context in which the Cambiemos government⁸ put the issue of renewable energy on the public agenda, calling to participate in these

⁷ José Seoane, ‘Obama, Macri y la economía verde: la neoliberalización de la cuestión ambiental’ [Obama, Macri and the Green Economy: The Neoliberalisation of the Environmental Issue], *Observatorio Petroleo Sur*, 9 October 2017. <https://www.opsur.org.ar/blog/2017/10/09/obama-macri-y-la-economia-verde-la-neoliberalizacion-de-la-cuestion-ambiental/>

⁸ Translator’s note: In 2015, the conservative political coalition Cambiemos (‘Let’s Change’) was founded, made up of the Republican Proposal, Radical Civic Union, and Civic Coalition ARI parties. In 2019, the coalition was renamed Juntos por el Cambio (‘Together for Change’).

projects through the RenovAr I, II, and III tenders.⁹ The proposal to do good business with renewable energy was well understood by the Argentine president himself. As a businessman, he reaped enormous profits through the Macri Group with the purchase and resale of six wind farms without having to bid for a tender. In just a few months, he made at least \$15 million, representing losses to the state of several hundred million dollars, for which there is an ongoing legal case against him. This is just one example of how profit impacts public assets as well as the application of the law.

The development of renewable energy under corporate control replicates the processes of the private appropriation of natural resources and the resulting dispossession, environmental degradation, and dependency without effectively securing the energy transition. A more dramatic example of this is the corporate interest in the control of lithium reserves, which was behind the 2019 coup d'état in Bolivia and is also behind the developments in electric cars announced by Tesla and Elon Musk. In the same vein, the green economy and the Green New Deal also express the emerging attempts of corporate power to control and develop these activities.

The Construction of the 'Green' Concept: The Neoliberal Turning Point in the Environmental Question

As we have noted, rather than embodying a 'greening' of the economy, the green economy is more accurately an economisation of the 'green' concept. The green economy promotes processes of monetary valorisation of the environment and nature. These processes are evident in the importance awarded to environmental accounting, building natural capital, and the extension of ecosystem services and market mechanisms that address environmental issues, such as carbon markets linked to climate change. This is a reflection of the commodification or capitalisation of nature and the environment, which, as we have already said, does not conflict with the definitions of the Green New Deal that we have examined.

⁹ Translator's note: The RenovAr renewable energy auction programme was launched in 2016 to increase private sector renewable generation capacity.

The other dimension of the neoliberal approach to the environmental question is precisely what we have previously referred to as the naturalisation or biologisation of the environment. This process, which dates back to the interventions that were developed when the United Nations convened the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, includes a series of mechanisms aimed at de-socialising and de-historicising the socioenvironmental question.

The very notion of the environment was established in the nineties as a reference to a non-human physical and natural world, which, emerging in the midst of a narrative about sustainable development and the substitution of the ‘problems of the human environment’. The appearance of this notion marks a watershed moment in this long process, which dates back to the dualisation of nature and society that is characteristic of capitalist colonial modernity.¹⁰ Today, the construction of the ‘green’ concept and the reduction of the socioenvironmental question to this concept represents a new step in the process to strip the environment of its social and historical dimension – in this case, even by (artificially) reproducing certain biological processes. It is this ‘green’ reductionism of the environment, of the diversity of human and non-human life forms and their ecosystems, and of nature that can be integrated into the economic dynamics of the market and capitalist production. This should warn us of the consequences of critical and progressive sectors adopting this ‘green’ label.

Likewise, we should be wary of seeing the current crisis as an opportunity. One of the characteristics of neoliberal governments lies precisely in the ability to turn the crises it causes into a catalysts for deepening its own transformations. Tragically, this has been an immediate result of the COVID-19 pandemic: a dramatic deepening of the dynamics of social inequality, the deterioration and destruction of the living conditions of large sectors of the population, extractivism and authoritarianism that characterise capitalist neoliberalisation in general, and, in particular, the neoliberal offensive that has been unfolding in the region since 2015. To a certain extent, we could say that this represents the exacerbation and

¹⁰ For more on this, read: José Seoane, *Las (re)configuraciones neoliberales de la cuestión ambiental. Una arqueología de los documentos de Naciones Unidas sobre el ambiente 1972–2012* [Neoliberal (Re)Configurations of the Environmental Question: An Archaeology of United Nations Documents on the Environment 1972–2012] (Buenos Aires: Ed. Luxemburg – IEALC, 2017). <http://gealyc.blogspot.com.ar/>

naturalisation of a crisis that was already present in the ‘normality’ that existed before.

The People’s Alternatives

In the current context of the pandemic and the crisis of civilisation that it deepens, ideas of a Green New Deal have been gaining ground in the progressive and critical camp. The demands that counter-cyclical public investment consider the ecological question and that the solution to the social emergency incorporate environmental concerns are well-intentioned. But this would require an awareness of the meanings behind the notions of a Green New Deal or Green Pact and the effects that they have or could have on emancipatory practices and horizons.

In Latin America, the actions of subaltern subjects and people’s movements in recent decades have forged a multiplicity of practices and programmes built on the strong coordination of social and environmental factors within a perspective of social change. References to natural and social common goods, social and environmental justice, living together well or good living (*el convivir bien* or *buen vivir*), and comprehensive and popular agrarian reform are examples of this. These practices also include popular and democratic reformulations of sovereignty and their expressions through food sovereignty, with links to peasant, indigenous and family-based agricultural production and agroecology, community markets, and popular access to food in sufficient quantity and quality. Yet another example is the concept of energy sovereignty, under whose banner renewable energy is developed through communal models of production and distribution as well as public state control. These reformulations are even more important today in the face of the social and reproduction crisis that the pandemic has accentuated. Furthermore, with regard to the climate crisis, we must start with the contributions of global networks and platforms as well as the agreements reached at the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (2010) and the People’s World Conference on Climate Change and the Defence of Life (2015), both held in Tiquipaya, Bolivia. Faced with the deterioration and destruction of the conditions for the existence of human and non-human life posed by the current neoliberal phase of capitalism, these proposals and experiences illuminate the path of essential alternatives that we must collectively build.

The Ecosocialist Green New Deal in the US

An Interview with Thea Riofrancos

The Research Collective on Socio-Environmental Crisis and Dispossession of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research interviewed Thea Riofrancos, a member of the steering committee of the Democratic Socialists of America's Ecosocialist Working Group in 2020. Thea is an associate professor of political science at Providence College and a Radcliffe Institute Fellow. She is a regular contributor to The Guardian, Jacobin, and other media. Her published work includes A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal (2019, co-author) and Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador (2020).

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: How did the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) come up with the Green New Deal policy to address the environmental crisis?

Thea Riofrancos: In 2017, a group of DSA members established the Ecosocialist Working Group to address environmental and climate crisis issues. Since then, the group has grown substantially and is now one of the largest in the organisation, with over a thousand members (the organisation has a total of 70,000 members). In the first year of the group, we worked a great deal in the area of 'energy democracy': the proposal to democratise, nationalise, and de-commodify electric companies (to establish public utilities and services). We now have about 15 local chapters with energy democracy campaigns. When the Green New Deal (GND) theme emerged in late 2018, we began developing 'An Ecosocialist Green New Deal: Guiding Principles', which was published in February 2019. The principles pick up on the GND paradigm while simultaneously rad-

icalising it, declaring that the root cause of the climate crisis is global capitalism and that our society must be rebuilt to value human needs and the health of the planet instead of the profit of the ruling class. Our next step was to draw up a proposal to prioritise the ecosocialist GND as a central campaign of the DSA. We achieved that at our 2019 convention. There, over 1,000 delegates representing local chapters made decisions that would guide the organisation's activities over the next two years and elected the new National Political Committee. One of those decisions, which received an almost unanimous vote of support, was to launch a campaign promoting the ecosocialist Green New Deal. From this moment on, the working group has strived to implement that resolution by supporting local chapters with their ecosocialist efforts, designing new platforms to facilitate coordination between chapters, and developing strategies with the participation of our members.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: Could you summarise the fundamental features of the proposal for a GND?

Thea Riofrancos: First, the GND proposes to decarbonise the economy within the time frame presented by climate science, which means halving global emissions by 2030. In order to do this, we propose that the countries of the Global North reduce their emissions even more quickly, given their historical role in the accumulation of emissions. To achieve this goal, we must transform the energy system (from fossil fuels to renewable energy), electrify many processes (transport, heating/cooling, industrial activities, etc.), and change the agricultural system (from an energy-intensive and polluting system to agroecology), among other profound changes.

On the other hand, we propose massive public intervention and investment as the driving force for this transition, which would occur in many social and economic spheres. This would be comparable to the mobilisation of resources that took place in the years following World War II. The type and pace of transformation required cannot be brought about by market mechanisms or private companies, much less by individual acts of change. On the contrary, it requires state planning and coordination at all levels of government, financing with public resources, and the momentum of social mobilisation and collective action.

Finally, the ecosocialist GND paradigm firmly links the issue of climate change to that of socio-economic inequality. The proposal not only talks about reducing emissions, but also about guaranteeing health insurance, employment, housing, public transport, and the right to unionise. It envisions a massive transformation to make urban, suburban, and rural planning more equal and more democratic and to create an environment that includes more public green spaces and is guided by the well-being of people and the planet, not by real estate profit.

From the beginning, policy surrounding the GND has been marked by a dynamic process between social movements and progressive politicians. In November 2018, the young democratic socialist congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined members of the Sunrise Movement, a movement of young people mobilising around the issue of climate change, in occupying the office of Democratic Congresswoman and Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi.

This move demonstrated that the GND has sparked a battle within the Democratic Party between the more left-wing and the more centrist factions. More moderate Democrats, and obviously the Republican Party, reject the link between climate change and social inequality presented in this GND; they also reject the massive scale of public investment prescribed.

But it is worth noting that Ocasio-Cortez did not invent the GND paradigm. For years, environmental justice movements have linked climate change and its environmental impacts to the unequal structure of our societies. In fact, Ocasio-Cortez attributes her commitment to climate policy (and her decision to run for Congress) to one such movement: the mobilisation of indigenous nations and their allies against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota. These movements point out that the wealthy classes and countries bear most of the responsibility for emissions and environmental damage while the victims of global warming are indigenous communities, African Americans, the working class, and, broadly speaking, marginalised sectors.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: From here (south of the South), there is an idea that the GND is linked to proposals for green capitalism or the green economy, at least in its initial expressions. To what extent does this GND differ from the proposals of the green economy model? What are the key elements that can take on this paradigm?

Thea Riofrancos: ‘Green capitalism’ purports to mitigate the symptoms of capitalism – global warming, the mass extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems – without transforming the model of accumulation and consumption that caused the climate crisis in the first place. It is a ‘techno-fix’: the fantasy of changing everything without changing anything. We see this kind of proposal now in the European Green Deal. We also see it in the electromobility model of companies like Tesla, for example. In this vision, nothing would change apart from swapping our conventional vehicles for electric vehicles. Meanwhile, we would maintain the domination of highways and cars over our urban and suburban spaces while reproducing an unsustainable pattern of extractivism (to produce an electric car requires more than 80 kilograms of copper, plus lithium, cobalt, nickel, and other natural resources).

In stark contrast to this false solution, ecosocialism understands that the environmental crisis lies in capitalism itself. This is why we at the DSA developed the ecosocialist GND. This vision recognises the physical limits of the planet, the impossibility of ‘green growth’, and the urgency of changing not only the mode of accumulation but also: a) daily patterns of consumption, work, transport, housing, planning, food, and more in order to guarantee a dignified life for all; b) de-commodifying basic services for survival and well-being and changing a privatised, individualist, and unequal consumption model to a collective and democratic consumption model within the limits of the planet; c) democratising the economy and control over natural resources and technology (including green technologies such as electromobility and solar panels); d) transforming our communities to serve working-class sectors, ecosystems, and the planet rather than the profits of the ruling class; and, finally, e) demilitarising, de-colonialising, and working for a future of global cooperation and solidarity.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: In your opinion, what would be the first steps towards the construction of a GND in the short term?

Thea Riofrancos: In the United States, the first steps in terms of a public policy toward a GND would be to: 1) end subsidies for and dismantle the fossil fuel sector; keep oil, coal, and gas in the ground (through strong regulations); and nationalise oil companies; 2) invest in the public sector on a massive scale to decarbonise the energy system; and 3) guarantee jobs for all, with a focus on green sectors.

However, we will not achieve this without a strong, constant social mobilisation in all spheres of life. In 2019, the US witnessed a historic scale of mobilisation against police brutality in African American communities. In 2018, we saw a historic wave of strikes by teachers and nurses, among other sectors. We would need something similar in magnitude and militancy to implement the proposals of the GND. We know that there is no social progress without social struggle from below led by the working class. In the history of leftist governments, we have seen that struggles can be institutionalised in public policies, although always provisionally.

We are currently at the crossroads of multiple crises. We are faced with a pandemic, an economic crisis, and the climate crisis. In addition, in the US we are witnessing an uprising not only against police violence in African American communities, but also against a society based on racial oppression and against a government that does not invest in the basic needs of communities, all while investing in police, prisons, and wars.

Therefore, it is crucial that the next steps towards a GND address the concrete problems that the working class is facing in their daily lives. To this end, we have been working on a proposal called the Green Stimulus, a platform that applies the principles of the GND to the immediate crisis we face. This is a proposal to use public money to fuel the energy transition, at the same time creating millions of decent jobs in economic sectors with the least, or even a positive, environmental impact. This is a proposal that would benefit marginalised communities suffering not only from the pandemic but also from economic despair. The idea of the green stimulus is not to push for 'green growth' but to seize the moment and put us on the path to a socially and environmentally just society with a low-emissions economy, more sustainable planning, and food sovereignty.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: Which social actors does the possibility of setting this process in motion depend on? What alliances do you think are necessary?

Thea Riofrancos: We know that social transformation only comes through people power. This power comes from social movements: trade unions, small farmer organisations, indigenous movements, neighbourhood organisations. In the case of the US, the social forces to secure a GND are found in urban struggles for the right to housing, public transport, and green and public spaces. Education, health care, and care work unions are essential: most of these workers are women of colour and migrants, and therefore their work is marginalised and undervalued. Their unions are generally supportive of the GND and have a vision of collective well-being. Understood in the broadest sense, care work is key to an ecosocialist society; communities and the planet must be cared for. It is worth noting that the mobilisation of young people is extremely important. By and large, not only do young people today recognise the environmental emergency and play a leading role in the climate justice movement; living through one crisis after another has also made them more radical. On the other hand, indigenous movements as well as allied movements are fighting against extractivism, which threatens indigenous territories and collective rights. And then there are the environmental justice movements fighting against toxic pollution (from factories, power plants, petrochemical plants, etc.), which primarily affects African American communities and other marginalised sectors.

Lastly, the DSA plays an important role in mobilising young leftists, radicalising public debate on the environment, and recruiting candidates for election campaigns. There are elected officials in many US states and cities who are DSA members, and they are pushing the GND, among other transformative policies. There are two DSA members in Congress alone: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: How is the transition to an ecosocialist society envisioned within the DSA? Can the GND serve as

an opportunity for this transition? What is the role of the working class in this process?

Thea Riofrancos: Firstly, union organising is important. In the US, there has been a renewed wave of strikes, especially in the education sector, but also in the health care and supermarket sectors, among others. We are witnessing new ties between the trade union and environmental movements. In January 2019, for example, there was a historic strike of thirty thousand teachers in Los Angeles through which they won green spaces for schools, among other demands. Before that, striking teachers in West Virginia demanded that coal companies with mines in their state pay more taxes. Beyond these specific demands, it is worth emphasising that the education and health sectors are absolutely essential to a more equal and sustainable world. The other victories of these strikes, such as an increase in the public education budget, are also ‘green’ victories and are essential to a GND. It should be noted that unions in the service and nursing sectors have shown their support for a GND. Obviously, the most complicated sectors of workers to bring on board for an energy transition are those who work in the fossil fuel industry. This is an incredibly complicated issue, but the most important paradigm in this area is the ‘just transition’ model, which emphasises that workers who would lose their jobs due to the energy transition must be protected.

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research: You co-authored a book on this transition called *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*. In the book, you call to ‘recharge internationalism’. What can you tell us about this proposal?

Thea Riofrancos: In the book we published, we write that the climate crisis is a planetary crisis and that the scope of the GND should therefore be planetary as well. But we are not referring to the Paris Agreement or other agreements among elites, which are too weak and too slow, and which protect the interests of the most powerful economies and corporations. Instead, we propose a new type of ‘internationalism’, one that is from below and on the left, and we focus on the issue of global green technology production chains – especially lithium batteries, which are key to the energy transition. They are needed to charge cars, buses, bicycles, electric scooters, and more and to store energy in renewable grids

because solar and wind power are intermittent and variable. For these reasons, the global demand for lithium is going to increase significantly, mainly due to the growth of the electromobility market (particularly private electric cars). Chile is one of the world's leading exporters of lithium; the Andean salt flats in Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia hold more than 50% of the world's known reserves. Although lithium is essential to combatting the climate crisis, in Chile lithium extraction has a number of socio-environmental impacts both on ecosystems and on indigenous communities living around the Salar de Atacama, Chile's largest salt flats. The combination of the lithium and copper sectors has resulted in severe water depletion in the salt flat and has also decreased the population of species such as the Andean flamingo. The collective and territorial rights of indigenous communities and their livelihoods have been violated. In addition, lithium production has been marked by the repression of workers.

Given these impacts and the local movements against 'green extractivism' (such as the Plurinational Observatory of Andean Salt Flats), the GND cannot reproduce the same patterns of production and consumption as contemporary capitalism. In the book, we emphasise that we must shift from a car-centric model, in which each person has his or her own private car, to a public transit system which uses resources much more rationally under a collective consumption model (an electric bus makes much more ecological and social sense than millions of Teslas). The current international trade model must also be transformed. We reject 'free trade' deals and favour fair and green trade models that prioritise labour and indigenous rights and protect ecosystems. And, because we do not believe that change comes from above, we propose new, cross-border relationships of solidarity between workers and communities working and living in the nodes of production chains who are reclaiming their rights and coordinating visions of an alternative world.

An Ecosocialist Vision for Decarbonisation in Latin America

Sabrina Fernandes has a PhD in sociology and is an ecosocialist activist in Brazil. She is an editor at Jacobin Brasil and a researcher at the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (IRGAC) of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

We are in a race against time to combat climate change. In order to curb it, we need to fight for another kind of change. We must change the system we live in, but this is not a simple task. An anti-capitalist position is not enough without a plan for what we want in the future. However, time is against us. To avoid climate change, we have to change the system, but the political conditions today are not conducive to this. The right wing is strong in many countries, as is the denial of climate science. We need to come up with a plan that quickly makes changes possible in the power grid and in cities, transport, and food production in the coming years. A decarbonisation plan would create the conditions for deeper changes in another political conjuncture, since it would slow down our race against time.

It is impossible to think about decarbonisation without considering the historical conditions of Latin America as well as the impact of development processes and extractivism on the region and its capitalist production cycle. If we intend to change the world to build an ecosocialist society, it is essential that we start from the South.

A Green New Deal That Addresses the Roots of the Problem

The discussion surrounding a Green New Deal (GND), whether in the United States or in Latin America, is very diverse. While everyone talks about decarbonisation and investment in renewable energy, what this actually means varies according to who is making the proposal.

When I think of a GND, I think of a decarbonisation plan that is urgent for this decade and the next. It is a plan that demands boldness. Whether it is the GND in the United States or a similar project under a different name in another country, the most important consideration is that it is not possible to talk about decarbonisation as if it involves just a few adjustments here and there. Nor should we accept that large corporations set the terms for this change, as they see ‘green’ schemes as an opportunity to profit and reposition themselves in the market.

The climate crisis is the result of a long process of economic expansion and its environmental impacts. Under capitalism, nature is treated as a source for resources – even its protection must be legitimised by profit or correspond with the interests of capital. It is not surprising that many ‘carbon offset’ initiatives serve a function in the financial market and can be used to justify emissions in another area. While public funds can help preserve biomes, the market insists on promoting solutions that make the state a partner of business, the stock market, and the credit and lending systems. Therefore, we argue that capitalist ecology is a false ecology, as it fails to identify the root cause of the climate and ecological crisis.

As ecosocialists, we think about the importance of regulating the social metabolism together with the metabolism of nature so that we do not forget that we are also part of nature. For this reason, we seek to question the trends of climate transition projects. This includes the GND and other plans. We also emphasise the need to build these projects from the bottom up.

Popular organisations must be at the heart of decarbonisation plans. If this does not happen, we will see projects that are insufficient and slow and that hold back the transition by subordinating it to market interests. Capitalists know that oil cannot last forever – that is why some of them are also committed to seeking alternatives. That is also why they seek to achieve decarbonisation, but they do so under conditions that guarantee

the sovereignty of the private sector and a convenient pace for securing profits to the very last drop. As ecosocialists, we argue that a good transition plan must include important reforms, but also that these reforms must always be attentive to the conditions necessary to change the entire system and guarantee a different model that does not copy the productivist tendencies of capitalism.

The Answer Lies in Solidarity among Exploited Peoples

It is indisputable that there is no time to first achieve socialism and only then invest in the ecological changes that we need. Little time remains to reduce greenhouse gas emissions before the damage is irreparable. There is even less time for the exploited peoples of the world, who already live under harsh conditions and are the ones who will most suffer from the impacts of the climate crisis. Studies suggest that the average temperature will rise by 3°C, and it is possible that many people will experience an increase of as much as 6°C. Those who have more money will be able to pay for air conditioning to be installed in their homes and offices, which will also increase the demand for electricity. Those who work outdoors, such as farmers, street sweepers, street vendors, delivery workers, construction workers, and many others, will find it increasingly difficult to work and will be exposed to the risk of disease and even death.

Consequently, trade unions have a fundamental role to play in building a decarbonisation plan. We are well aware that the capitalist system sees Latin America's natural resources as mere assets. Workers in state-owned oil and mining companies are constantly fighting against privatisation attempts. In the fight against climate change, there is no guarantee that a state-owned company in the dirty energy sector will be more sustainable. Many changes are needed to transform the polluting energy sector, which is already obsolete. But state companies must be protected, firstly because organised workers can assert their demands more forcefully in the public sector, and secondly because a major decarbonisation plan requires more control of the energy sector (which will not be possible in the private sphere). It is possible that those who know the sector best because they work in it will also become climate activists, as their inclusion is essential for a just transition with more jobs and strengthened public actions.

In fact, a just transition is a concept that must always be addressed in the discussion about a green deal. A just transition is more likely to be addressed if we ensure that organised workers are part of these discussions. Can we really expect capitalist companies that claim to be committed to the planet to promote the creation of green jobs in the renewable energy sector? Are these even good jobs? Will companies give up their profits to guarantee jobs and make the necessary investments, even when this results in economic losses? Of course not, because the private sector is driven by profit. The ‘green’ aspect of these ‘green jobs’ in major companies only refers to the green technologies employed and does not necessarily represent a genuine concern for nature.

In our region, we must understand the tremendous importance of the Latin American indigenous peoples and peasant movements in this task. These movements warned of the ecological crisis long before governments began to act. That is why the teachings of traditional *buen vivir* and *teko porā* (‘living well’) inspire researchers and socio-environmental activists all over the world.¹¹ But these perspectives cannot be allowed to be reduced to mere pleasantries. Talking about living well today requires addressing the demands of indigenous peoples and respecting their knowledge while also accepting that words alone are not enough and that it is necessary to create the conditions for radical change in society – especially because there is even less time left for these groups. Of course, this also means analysing the economic contradictions and demands for development that are present in Latin America and proposing a different concept of development that guarantees a decent quality of life as part of a paradigm of sustainability.

Women workers must also be included in the discussion about decarbonisation. It is not possible to talk about a just transition without recognising the fundamental role of women in caring for families and nature. When there is no water, it is common for women to have to fetch it. When children fall ill, our society still expects women to take care of them. Women are the majority in strategic service sectors in many countries, especially

¹¹ Translator’s note: *Buen vivir* or ‘living well’ is a concept stemming from indigenous peoples in Latin America that favours community over individual interests and seeks ways of life that are ecologically balanced. *Teko porā* is a similar concept of collective good living originating from the Guaraní indigenous peoples of Paraguay.

in health and education. Investments in these sectors can contribute to alleviating women's excessive workloads in the field of social reproduction while producing social value with less of an environmental impact. Moreover, such investments have a greater impact on the groups that are excluded from conventional development plans. The Black population in many Latin American countries does not have adequate access to health care and will suffer even more from the consequences of climate change due to this social vulnerability. The proposal for our decarbonisation must also unquestionably include the fight against environmental racism.

A decarbonisation plan built from below is of vital interest to the exploited peoples, as it addresses both the climate crisis and their material conditions of life under capitalism. We know that the private renewable energy sector and other green technologies will be a central part of the transition due to their economic strength. However, these sectors cannot be the leaders of this process.

People's solidarity is key to connecting struggles against the impacts of climate change, from the millions of refugees to the difficulties growing food, the issue of securing work, and the emergence of new diseases. A people does not need to experience the same situation as another to recognise the importance of these struggles. A global decarbonisation plan must be able to bring about changes that do not only favour the rich or that simply screen out the sun.

The immediate debates on decarbonisation should include popular assemblies that address the demands for a just transition, from the need for jobs to the struggle for land, so that those responsible for writing the bills and action plans do so in harmony with the peoples expressing these demands. This is important in order to avoid producing a purely technocratic plan that can be easily appropriated by capital and, in particular, to ensure that we have the political force capable of pressuring right-wing or moderate (or sometimes even left-wing) governments for a just transition as quickly as possible.

Popular assemblies are a very common element of popular organisations and struggles in Latin America. Recent experiences such as the Alternative World Water Forum (2018), the People's Summit (2017), and the People's Nature Forum (2020) serve as examples of the importance of bringing together diverse groups, from socio-environmental activists to

indigenous organisations. Ecosocialists in Brazil and other countries are committed to building spaces like this because we know that the possibilities for radical change depend on collective organisation.

What Can We Do Today?

The coronavirus pandemic has affected the dynamics of commodity production and the organisation of life. Especially in impoverished countries living under far-right governments, the pandemic has meant death caused either by the virus or by hunger. In Brazil, for example, unemployment affects about 12.6% of the working class.¹² Informal work is the only option for many workers, meaning that they have no way to pay their rent or put food on the table if they stay at home during the pandemic. The situation is worse for the Black population. The Bolsonaro government has taken advantage of this situation to promote private sector intervention in the sanitation system; meanwhile, deforestation continues at a disconcerting rate. In Chile, the pandemic meant more repression against the population with harsh lockdown rules at the same time as there is a water crisis in the regions of Coquimbo and Valparaíso.

The pandemic exposes the daily social inequalities that many choose to ignore. There are so many crises occurring simultaneously that we cannot be misled when it comes to the solution. We must not return to ‘normal’ as advocated by governments and corporations: ‘normal’ is part of the problem. It is time to demand strategic changes that represent more radical responses and create conditions for other changes in the future. Major decarbonisation can help us today. However, it will not be easy to demand structural reforms without working-class mobilisation. Here, we see the important role of social movements in Latin America in demanding the impossible, especially when any other perspective could push us even further into the abyss.

¹² Cristina Índio do Brasil, ‘IBGE: desemprego cai 1,6 ponto percentual e atinge 12,6%’ [IBGE: Unemployment Drops 1.6 Percentage Points to 12.6%], *Agência Brasil*, 30 November 2021. <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/economia/noticia/2021-11/ibge-desemprego-cai-16-e-atinge-em-126-no-primeiro-trimestre>

Starting with the debate on the employment issue can help to engage more people, even more so if the main demands include quick and simple improvements to the quality of life. If unemployment is a problem, the task of governments is to invest in job creation, but not just any kind of jobs. It is possible to create new jobs that pay better, require fewer hours of work, and contribute to sectors where growth is needed. Since we are in a hurry, we must work with both long-term and short-term goals. In the short-term context, this means immediate investments whose results can be seen in a few years in at least three sectors: energy, transport, and food.

The countries of the South, which have dependent economies, export raw materials and import manufactured goods including fuel from foreign refineries. New jobs can be created and energy distribution improved if we instead promote renewable energy projects while combating the economic dependence and trade deficits that make our nations more vulnerable to the will of international capital. Energy transition in Latin America requires that we address not only the problems of the oil or natural gas industry, but also those of the large mining industry, whether domestically or foreign-owned. In this field, local investment regulations and protections for state-owned companies are necessary so that the demand for minerals and fossil fuels is not based on the pressures of the world market, but rather on a social rationale that determines the extraction of these goods according to their use value and not their exchange value. Renewable energies are not a panacea. There is no perfect solution that is without an impact on nature, but, with good planning and investments made by the public sector, it is possible to set feasible goals for the power grid transition while also promoting research in science and technology that can help with the challenges of achieving efficiency and avoiding waste. This process must include a discussion about strategic degrowth; this is not about degrowth as a rule, which would make life on our continent worse, but about perspectives that allocate energy production to activities that improve our quality of life, such as health, education, culture, and recreation, as well as to changes in transport and food production.

At the same time, the consumption of environmentally harmful products as well as the unbridled consumerism stimulated by marketing must be combated. The highest rates of consumption are in the richest countries,

but big industry knows that it must push consumers in the South in a similar direction if it wants to make more profit. Changes in local production sectors as well as in advertising regulations can help to ensure that the middle and upper classes do not consume at the problematic levels of countries like the United States. Simultaneously, a better quality of life can be guaranteed to the poorest sectors of the population, especially for people who do not have access to basic goods such as refrigerators and computers or to affordable, quality health care and housing.

In addition, state investment in public transport is a way to change the norm of private cars in cities in favour of pedestrians, cyclists, and buses. New quality jobs can be created by having more buses on the streets, as well as by producing electric buses or building underground lines. A decarbonisation plan for cities will also be a plan for good jobs. It is clear that many 'green jobs' also need workers with specific kinds of knowledge, which reinforces the need to invest in education.

The food production sector is also strategic in the fight against climate change as well as for ecosocialism: food sovereignty must be a priority for any sustainable society. Deforestation resulting from agribusiness practices, as well as the impacts of the use of chemical fertilisers, contribute to greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, and the advance of agribusiness destroys traditional ways of life and plays an active role in violence against indigenous people and peasants.

Any 'green plan' in Latin America that sets out to be radical and considers itself to be an alternative to the plans of 'green capitalism' (also known as the 'green economy') has the obligation to address the question of agrarian reform. Land concentration in the region is responsible for the destruction of nature and for the great inequality between classes. The voices of the movements fighting for agroecological and popular agrarian reform must be heard and their leaderships must be included in public policy and other developments. Only then will a 'Green New Deal' in the region succeed in connecting the different struggles taking place, from those demanding land to the citizens of big cities who yearn for healthy food free of agrochemicals.

A far-reaching 'green plan' in Latin America may be the response required of people today. Although there are many blows that must be resisted, movements are strongest when they make constructive demands

capable of expanding ties of solidarity that go beyond defensive moments. Combining the different forms of resistance of our time and the radical demands against climate change would be very powerful. Certainly, it would be much easier if most countries in our region were not experiencing such harsh conditions. However, there is no time to lose, and all responses to crises must also be solutions to find an exit from a system of crisis. We must be careful: what we have today is not a window of opportunity, because a global politics and scenario of death do not offer opportunities. Those who talk like this based on capitalist ideology are too cynical. There is, however, a window of responsibility; it is up to us to fight for strategic changes in the face of the health and economic crises and to address the ecological crisis. After all, any politics that does not address the climate crisis is also a politics of death.





Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
*is an international, movement-driven
institution focused on stimulating intellectual
debate that serves people's aspirations. .*

www.thetricontinental.org