



A PEOPLE'S GREEN NEW DEAL

Max Ajl
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Ahead of the COP26 global summit, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a grim warning against the continued use of fossil fuels in its 6th scientific assessment report. The "Green New Deal" (GND) debate, emerging most in the United States, offers a vision of a new social compact where a socio-technical transition from an existing - but shrinking - fossil fuel heavy industrial base to the manufacture and use of clean energy technologies along with an expansion of social security protection benefits. Max Ajl's sharp treatise "A People's Green New Deal" intervenes in broad church left debates warning against eco-nationalism, the risk of entrenching neoliberal economic structural reforms and emphasises the importance of identifying radical reforms which have revolutionary potential.

Ajl begins with a critique of "Green Capitalist" iterations of the GND which jointly tackles the creep of neoliberal economic thought embedded in the increasingly popular version championed by US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez which undermines its social democratic aspirations. The "Green Right" which champions outright neoliberal reforms have treated environmental problems as "externalities" to be resolved through the design of compensating effects. These demands range from the commodification of solar and wind energy resource potential through various private power trade mechanisms, to carbon taxes, to calls to green the US military.

In the case of the social democratic platform, Ajl contends the latter sows the seeds of its own destruction. This version of the GND, while calling for active divestment from harmful industries, shows no intention to challenge capitalist accumulation in emerging sectors based on new technologies while blatantly ignoring the question of climate debt/reparation. Climate debt and demands for related reparations have historically called on industrial nations, who have historically benefitted from patterns of cheap resource extraction and immense wealth accumulation, to understand compensate impact nations and communities as part of their obligations to address the impacts of Climate change. Centering the question of Climate debt and reparations, for Ajl, necessarily involves an anti-imperialist analysis which must contend with both the historical and continued power imbalances between the Global North and South.

Ajl warns of the growing enthusiasm of international finance instruments (World Bank, IMF, European Investment Bank, among others) in leading Climate finance discussions as signalling the co-option of clean technology systems based on clean technology as simply representative of new asset classes. The book observes that technology itself is not neutral and urges that simply nationalising private enterprises, who currently command its use, does not itself constitute a fundamental shift in relations. "A People's Green New Deal" highlights the importance of rejecting false solutions to the crisis by empowering radical popular movements to build alternatives. These alternatives would focus on developing social interdependence by deepening local democratic control of industry and state institutions capable of ensuring basic service delivery. Simply put, without fundamental transformation in the relations of production, the world system



of capitalist accumulation will remain intact, reproducing inequality through exploitation and dis-possession.

The book makes a clear call for an anti-imperialist version of a GND or Just Transition which seeks to break ranks with imperialist powers. Ajl argues nations in the Global North are looking to use climate targets and the urgency of the crisis itself to dictate the economic and fiscal policy of nations in the Global South. Furthermore, there is acknowledgement that the peoples in the Global South, while historically only marginally contributing to GHG emissions, face disproportionate impacts of climate change exacerbating existing inequalities, increasing food security and the occurrence of forced migration among a growing list of other challenges.

Ajl's proposals appear to be presented in the form of a "dual power" strategy where popular movements leverage the potential of local state power (control of a district, city or municipality) while maintaining efforts to challenge the broader state and private capital in the domain of civil society. The key illustrative examples include a shift from commercial agriculture to agro-ecology, from energy markets with private producers to locally owned renewable energy, and the active demilitarisation of economies in the imperial core.

Notions of popular sovereignty are central to the concept of Decolonisation put forward in the synthesis of the book. Decolonisation is framed in Leninist terms as a bulwark against imperialism where colonised nations realise their right to self-determination achieving political and economic sovereignty. The "National Question" appears prominently in the overall argument and discussion focuses heavily on the limits imposed by imperial states. These constraints are described as rooted in the global expansion of capitalism, first through colonialism, and again through the proliferation of neoliberal policies forced on many newly independent nations through "structural adjustments" imposed as conditionalities to development loans. Ajl draws on these trends to chart the broad relationships between core and periphery and discusses the viability of Third world sovereignty under the prevailing conditions.

In South Africa, the thrust of the "National Question", is similar to the question of settler colonialism, that Ajl identifies with the USA, is decisively more focused on internal contradictions within the bounds of the nation itself. The viability of the types of important locally rooted alternatives Ajl points to are, in the South African context, deeply constrained by the impact of racial segregation policies of Apartheid and their afterlives. By way of simple example without decisive action to implement progressive urban and rural land reform many racialised communities, if focussed on highly localised approaches, may simply default into organising along the very racial and ethnic lines crafted by the colonial and Apartheid state. In addition to this, doing little to address inequality across marginalised communities, which are increasingly a source of tension, it constrains the majority of Black South Africans to conducting economic activities on non-productive land. As South Africa's social fabric itself is fracturing under the competitive tensions imposed by neoliberal reforms, betrayed freedom dreams and the urgencies of daily survival for the majority locked out of even low-wage employment. The challenge of building a cohesive national project in South Africa remains decidedly illusive.

Broader struggles waged by organised sections of the working class in South Africa appear focused on challenging central state authority, either through direct contest of the elections or through campaigns that demand targeted blanket reforms. These centre on demands for a dig-





nified living wage, national health insurance, decent housing, provision of basic services among others. The labour movement has also played a leadership role in asserting that needs workers and communities historically impacted by fossil fuel use must be taken as central in all energy transition planning processes. The urgency of the need to move away from fossil fuel-based industries has indeed opened a narrow window of opportunity to transfer power and control into public hands which could help prioritise a shift to towards ensuring basic service provision over profit motives.

There have since been a rapidly growing number of platforms on the Just Transition across South African civil society with early influential contributions derived from by eco-socialist principles. Following interest in new opportunities in the "Green Economy", private sector lobbies and a number of environmentalist organisations have since advocated for a variety of market-led reforms across a number of sectors of the economy using the language of Just Transition in an attempt to co-opt the discourse. Efforts advocating for the liberalisation of the energy sector promising trickle down benefits for workers and communities in new emerging industries are quickly becoming hegemonic. Very few concrete plans or proposals offer material security or viable alternatives for workers and communities already facing severe downstream risks of the declining coal sector they have been forced into economic dependency with. South Africa's industrial base continues to shrink as does the states capacity to provide the growing list of social welfare functions demanded of it. In digesting both the warning and the assertion from Aji on "What is to be Done?," the book appears a timely reminder that the battle within the left on the GND/Just Transition is equally important as the battle against the forces of exploitation itself.

