



Eco-Justice Ministries

Eco-justice: "the well-being of all humankind on a thriving Earth"

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THOUGHTS ABOUT THE GREEN NEW DEAL

EEE Forum - 2/25/19

Rough notes from Rev. Peter Sawtell

Start off with my normal disclaimer:

In my work with Eco-Justice Ministries, I'm a generalist. I try to pull together information and perspectives from lots of different places, and try to make sense of them out of an eco-justice ethical perspective.

I'm not a policy wonk -- and for today that is probably OK because the Green New Deal isn't a policy, at least not yet.

So ... I'll take a few minutes to provide a bit of an overview of what I've seen from a range of sources, especially in the 18 days since the resolution was introduced.

Historical trends leading up to Green New Deal

Long term categories: Environmental Justice (since 1988; a legal category since 1994) and Climate Justice -- emphasis on the people most directly impacted by climate change and environmental disruption. Call to slash carbon emissions is a justice issue.

Just transition -- recognition that slashing emissions and cutting production of fossil fuels will have enormous impact on communities. (My poster child: Craig, CO) This broader perspective of climate justice names justice for those who will be displaced.

People's Climate March (NYC -- 2014)-- historic in joining environmental and climate justice with labor (also racial justice, religious, youth, etc.)

2018 -- Global Climate March & Rise for Climate. Email from Rise for Climate last Labor Day:

In no uncertain terms, we must stand united behind all of our country's working people, and demand a just transition to a 100% clean and renewable energy future that creates millions of family-sustaining, union jobs, and ensures that racial and economic justice are key to action on climate in every community.

Rise for Climate event in Denver last September -- Colorado AFGL-CIO officer spoke, acknowledging tensions between much of labor and climate movement. Saw a positive alignment in those two movements joining forces against corporate power.

A political and moral reality -- bold political action to get us off fossil fuels will be impossible without buy-in from labor, and without some form of just transition. Appears that anything to meet IPCC goals (cut emissions 45% by 2030, carbon neutral globally by 2050) that does not include some part of those social justice components is politically dead.

That's probably a primary starting point for GND.

GND didn't start with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez a few months ago.

- Sunrise Movement since 2017 -- Youth led: Sunrise is a movement to stop climate change and create millions of good jobs in the process. "We're building an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives on our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and wellbeing of all people."
- Group called New Consensus (see handout) claims lots of influence in GND creation. "New consensus thinkers are exploring how government and other public institutions can lead the transition to a green economy, close wealth and income gaps between groups, spearhead innovation and research, kick-start new high wage industries, and more. "We are a global, distributed network of academics, creators, activists, leaders and entrepreneurs working to make the new consensus the standard operating system for national economies around the world."

Last fall's election, with a number of young, outspoken Democrats (or Democratic Socialists) pushing remarkable agenda - Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez probably the most visible. Language of GND starts to gain traction.

In December, I was part of a group meeting with DeGette's staff in Denver, calling for a change in House Rules to establish a "Select Committee for a Green New Deal" -- not taken up by DeGette or House leadership. That committee would have been given a one-year charge to define the principles of a GND, and to propose draft legislation.

As new Congress convenes, the January GND resolution (House and Senate) thus a different way to push Congress to developing legislation.

The GND resolution is NOT legislation -- 5 goals, 14 projects and 15 requirements.

Preamble to resolution names 2 crises: climate and economic. That's a different way of stating Pope Francis said in Encyclical: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental."

My image for the GND: this is like the platform for a political party. Lots of general ideas, with a hope that some of them will actually be enacted. An effort to define a direction, and to rally a group of supporters.

Both a strength and a weakness.

- Positive: GND is rapidly becoming a test for progressive politicians; a statement of principles and goals that is easy to understand -- "this idea of doing a gigantic economic transformation was hard to convey" and GND could help (New Yorker)
- In polarized, tribal political world, a GND which is now seen as one party's identity statement becomes toxic to the other side. "Green New Deal" quickly becoming an inaccurate collective term for any policies addressing both climate and social issues (as in today's Denver Post)

Another realistic factor to bear in mind (as pointed out crudely by Sen. Diane Feinstein this week) -- GND legislation unlikely to go anywhere in Republican-controlled Senate, and there's no way that it would be signed by Trump.

A rather negative article in Politico: "the debate over the Green New Deal is likely to be an exercise in messaging rather than policymaking until 2021 at the earliest."

Challenge for political path forward: how broad and intersectional will proposals be?

- Too narrow won't work -- actions to cut emissions (and especially production) that don't include just transition won't work.
- Too broad won't work -- GND is being challenged for having way too much: health care for all, etc.

National Catholic Reporter opinion: "The only way that climate change is 'related' to wage stagnation is that both issues are popular with progressive activists."

Politico: "some climate hawks are already nervous that the bold environmental goals could become cannon fodder in a war over even bolder economic proposals."

Politico: "But on the left, reducing emissions is seen as just one plank in a much broader progressive agenda. ... [GND] is an economic justice initiative that would root out inequality by taking on the powerful interests who harm the earth as well as the poor."

Question makes me think back almost 200 years to abolitionist movement, and rifts over how broad or narrow to make that cause.

- One side -- deal only with the abolition of slavery; don't distract and dilute (or corrupt) the movement with extraneous issues
- Other side -- work to bring justice and humanity must fight all oppression; within abolitionist movement, women must be given voice

Current question for climate movement -- do we go narrow, and focus as tightly as possible on slashing emissions, with clearly defined "just transition" elements; or is climate part of the much larger push for a just and sustainable society?

I don't have an answer to that.

I'm delighted to have climate being taken seriously. GND gives a way for media and politicians to demand climate action without getting bogged down (yet) in policy proposals.

My ethical leanings are very transformational, so I'm delighted to see a broad approach that sees need for economic and social transformation.

But I'm also very pragmatic about the need for real and rapid cuts in emissions, and I don't want noble efforts for broad social change to get in the way of real climate action -- because if we don't make those cuts right away, then there will be no justice.

It seems likely that the other two people on today's panel will be pointing toward different sides of the question about broad and narrow efforts ...

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