

Why the Green New Deal Needs Local Action to Succeed

Article by Aaron Vansintjan

April 22, 2020

Universal healthcare, a green economy, affordable and sustainable housing, and much more: for many people, the Green New Deal sounds too good to be true at a time when trust in politicians has been eroded by too many empty promises. Aaron Vansintjan argues that the success of the Green New Deal at the national level hinges on building widespread support through local-level projects and organising that show that real change is possible.

You would think that tackling inequality and climate change in one fell swoop would be almost universally popular. But the UK's 2019 general election suggested otherwise. With 43.6 per cent of the vote, the most popular party – the Conservative Party – has spent the past 10 years rolling back environmental measures and making the UK one of the most unequal countries in the OECD. Despite the radical vision it offered, voters turned away from Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, whose manifesto focused on eradicating extreme wealth, creating green jobs, privatising public transport, rebuilding public healthcare, and free public broadband. The same can be said for the Green Party of England and Wales, whose manifesto was centred on a socially just Green New Deal.

There are many other factors to be taken into account, such as the role of the media, the Conservatives' shrewd "Get Brexit Done" messaging, and the voting system, but the question of why people chose to cast their vote elsewhere still warrants close examination.

The Green New Deal is a set of policies being put forward by progressive parties around the Western world, and it matches the Labour Party's manifesto quite closely. Whilst the Green New Deal can take on different forms, in short it involves a huge injection of public funds into renewable and green projects and infrastructure to create jobs and tackle climate change. Advocates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders in the US have used the Green New Deal to articulate a vision for a kind of working-class environmentalism: a promise that we can live well, without jeopardising our children's futures.

The Green New Deal for Europe, an international campaign founded in 2019 by the Democracy for Europe (DiEM25) movement, presents some of the same principles for a just transition, but in a European context. Underlying these visions is the gamble that, when presented with a life-changing opportunity, those who have been excluded and made invisible in politics will vote for it. Yet, as the UK Labour Party's failed gamble shows us, having an inspiring, desirable vision alone is not enough to mobilise people to vote for Green New Deal-style policies.

A politics of empty promises

With the chaos of a global pandemic engulfing the news channels every hour, it is easy to forget that 2019 was a year of massive global unrest. Much of this protest was against austerity, and some was against climate policies. In France, the yellow vests rose up in every town and city against a fuel tax put in place by the Macron government, part of a package to cut fossil fuel consumption. In Ecuador, protests erupted against another fuel tax pushed for by the International Monetary Fund, which would – as in France – affect the poorest most. These are

just two of a long list of uprisings which, on the whole, tended to be *against* something: against poverty, against exclusion from the political system, against endemic corruption, against the elites.

Apart from the global green and climate movement, there is no significant global mobilisation calling for a Green New Deal. For now, the idea remains mostly contained to policy circles. As in the UK, it is quite possible that a majority of working-class people will not vote for it if and when it is offered to them. And why would they? Most people experience politics only in terms of empty promises. By promising so much, the Green New Deal can seem like the emptiest promise of all.

To be clear: many of the policies found in the Green New Deal are laudable. Environmental policies should work for everyone. They should not exclude immigrants or offer more austerity. But this is not enough to make it tangible for voters. For most people, the Green New Deal is so utopian, promising things like universal healthcare, a green economy, affordable and sustainable housing, full childcare, and democratic control over the workplace — things no one has ever experienced — that it seems simply unrealistic.

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How can those of us wanting to make the Green New Deal a reality make it resonate with people? The fact is, for it to win hearts, it will need to be brought down to earth and made tangible. In other words, the Green New Deal must be an everyday event, something that everyone can take part in — not just policy geeks drafting ambitious manifestos.

What's more, even if pro-Green New Deal candidates are elected, they may never be able to implement their policies. To hold politicians' feet to the fire, we will need social movements – independent from political parties – that are willing to fight *for* the Green New Deal, and not just *against* politics-as-usual.

Today, the COVID-19 pandemic has only been underway for only a few months, but it has already caused multiple crises— of finance, labour, industrial production, healthcare, and global relations. This is shaping up to be the 'Big One', on the scale of the Great Depression of the 1930s. It is at such a moment that people really need a Green New Deal — just as the original New Deal was a response to the Great Depression itself. But the Green New Deal, especially at this moment, needs people too. How could we make this happen?

Sowing change in the city

Since the early 2000s, residents of the small city of Jackson, Mississippi, have been regularly getting together in self-organised people's assemblies. Under the banner of the people's organisation Cooperation Jackson, the community — mostly Black and low-income — decides together how they want to make their city more just, democratic, and sustainable. Inspired by the Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, this movement pushes for what is called a "cooperative economy", where all members of the community have ownership of its wealth, not just a wealthy few. Over the years, Cooperation Jackson has built a network of affordable cooperative housing, urban farms, and composting businesses — and now they are investing in a 3D printing workshop and production facility, and producing medical-grade masks. Cooperation Jackson is so popular that two candidates it supported at the city's Mayoral elections were elected on three different occasions.

By fighting exclusive land ownership, racism, inequality, and building worker-owned businesses, the movement

has created a microcosm of what Green New Deal advocates push for. To win electoral victories, they had to first demonstrate to their neighbours what real change looks like, rather than just talking about it. You can read the story and philosophy of the organisation in the book *Jackson Rising*, written by movement leaders.

In each of these movements it is citizens themselves who make this a reality, with their governments pressured to comply — or else lose the next election.

In Barcelona, a movement for the right to housing — which occupies the homes of people being evicted by foreclosures and makes decisions in massive assemblies — grew so popular that they won the city elections in 2015, and again in 2019. The movement, rebranded Barcelona En Comú, has rewired the city's political system to allow the citizen assemblies regularly taking place in every neighbourhood to feed into city hall politics. They welcomed refugees rejected by the Italian government. They started transforming large parts of the city into car-less, green, pedestrianised living neighbourhoods. They prohibited illegal AirBnB rentals to stop rents spiraling out of control. And, perhaps most inspiring, they are taking control of the city's private water and energy companies in an effort to democratize and municipalise basic services. They've put together the lessons learned from this social movement-turned-government into a book, *Fearless Cities*, written together with radical urban social movements around the world.

In Berlin, a vibrant and militant tenant movement, responding to rapid gentrification and excessive rent increases, has fought to keep housing in their city affordable. In 2019, they won a big victory against a coalition of developers, landlords, and speculators — forcing the government to instate a rent freeze and buy up whole buildings for the purpose of social housing.

In each city — Jackson, Barcelona, Berlin — people have fought for a more democratic, cooperative economy, for the right to basic services, for a city that welcomes the poor and oppressed. Importantly, in each of these movements it is citizens themselves who make this a reality, with their governments pressured to comply — or else lose the next election. Together, these movements are at the forefront of what is being called “radical municipalism”, a set of practices that work from the ground up to make our towns and cities more democratic, sustainable, and just.

Making the Green New Deal real

All of this may sound impressive but hard to replicate. Where would those wanting to build this kind of movement in their city even begin? How would one find like-minded people, and eventually build up to such a large scale? The challenge appears even harder given the social limitations set by the current pandemic.

But today something amazing is happening. In every city and town, mutual aid networks – similar to what people in Jackson, Berlin and Barcelona have spent decades building – are emerging organically. In times of crisis, people get together and help each other out, whether by doing someone's shopping, raising money for their sick neighbours, or taking care of one another's kids.

Less well-known is that these kinds of mutual aid initiatives do not emerge out of nowhere. Even before a crisis, people build them through everyday encounters on the street or at the supermarket, meetings in building lobbies, or simply helping neighbours by shoveling snow or cooking for a community event. When a crisis like the current pandemic hits, these relationships become activated and form the ground for citizen-led mutual support.

It all begins with day-to-day things. Tenants unions helping residents get together and put pressure on their landlord to do their job and maintain the building can eventually scale up their demands to city hall – or organise for a rent strike during a crisis. Community gardens give people a place to meet and a sense of abundance and control over their surroundings, even in the middle of urban space. Talking to coworkers is the first step to demanding better pay and better environmental practices from bosses. All of these begin by meeting people at home and at work, building relationships, and eventually scaling up demands. In times of crisis, it is those relationships which can become a matter of survival.

From the ground up

But how does this fit in with the Green New Deal? It might seem like a far cry from building up renewable energy infrastructure to the scale needed to fight climate breakdown, or delivering the public transport and free healthcare promised by its advocates. But these municipalist movements hold the seed of a much bigger transformation.

For one, more democracy is better for the environment and for the poor. Democracy is not simply about voting every couple of years. Putting utilities in the hands of the public helps do away with corruption and bureaucracy. It makes public health and access to basic resources the priority, not profit. More concretely, extending decision-making beyond the technocrats and giving people the chance to get involved in politics beyond the ballot box shows that real change is possible.

Cooperation Jackson and Barcelona en Comú are good examples of this. As those involved began to sense just how much power they truly had, they felt confident enough to run their own candidates for elections. But they also tried to make sure that those candidates responded to – and were held to – the decisions of the neighbourhood assemblies that continued to operate after the elections. Voting for politicians to represent you in the halls of power is certainly easy, but there is nothing like knowing that one's own decisions and actions can make a difference.

These kinds of movements are also important because they are embedded in the most important parts of our lives: where we live and work. If people can experience the benefits of collective action – for example, knowing that their rent will not increase thanks to a community campaign – they are far more likely to get involved themselves.

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Take, for instance, events during summer 2017 in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale. Many residents of properties owned by the same management company were being forced to agree to a large rent increase. When a small group of tenants organised a rent strike in protest, many others doubted it would work. When the rent strikers won significant victories, however, more people joined them, eventually forcing the landlords to accept lower rent. Their success story has been told in the inspiring 30-minute documentary *This is Parkdale!* Today, they are building on years of organising to run a Toronto-wide campaign for residents to keep their rent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Locally organised, democratic movements are not just crucial to developing interest in the Green New Deal. They also play a unique role holding government officials and elected representatives accountable when they drag their feet and talk evasively of “compromises” and “being pragmatic”.

This isn't to say that local initiatives don't need any help from the government. On the contrary, many are very

dependent on the national government or other levels of power, whether for cutting red tape for starting energy cooperatives, getting funding for public transit, or collectively bargaining with “Big Pharma” to bring down medicine costs. In turn, national governments cannot implement radical Green New Deal policies without determined support from citizens pushing for change on a local level.

The implementation of a Green New Deal at a national level is necessary to buy time in the fight against climate change. But unless “mini-Green New Deals” continue to sprout up in every neighbourhood, it will lack the backing needed to succeed at the national level. To make the Green New Deal a reality we need existing, tangible alternatives of living and working together.



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Published April 22, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/why-the-green-new-deal-needs-local-action-to-succeed/>

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