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BIG TECH AND “CLEANER” FOSSIL FUELS WON'T SAVE US

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The planet is heating. Current policies have us on track to reach a global temperature increase of [around +3°C above pre-industrial levels](https://climateactiontracker.org/global/cat-thermometer/) (<https://climateactiontracker.org/global/cat-thermometer/>) by the end of the century, according to an independent analysis by Climate Action Tracker. This would be an extremely dangerous level of heating in a highly unstable climate system, lethal to millions. How people are affected will depend largely on how societies are organized. Capitalism under climate-emergency dictatorships? Capitalism in which popular uprisings have won, in some measure, a just transition away from fossil fuels and a just adaptation to climate change? Profoundly democratic societies moving towards ecosocialism? How should people who want action to slash greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, to limit future heating to +2°C at most, orient ourselves today?

There are some on the left today who, claiming to pursue such a climate goal, place their hopes in pressuring governments to promote technological innovations. In her article [“We Need to Change How We Talk About Climate Action”](https://jacobinmag.com/2021/05/climate-change-green-new-deal-technology) (<https://jacobinmag.com/2021/05/climate-change-green-new-deal-technology>) published online by *Jacobin*, a magazine probably more influential and widely read than any other English-language socialist publication, Holly Buck argues that supporters of climate action should be advocating for public investment in “infrastructure and innovation in climate- and energy-related technologies, from batteries and hydrogen to advanced manufacturing and carbon sequestration.” She suggests [the Biden infrastructure plan](https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/5/21/biden-offers-to-cut-infrastructure-plan-by-a-quarter) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/5/21/biden-offers-to-cut-infrastructure-plan-by-a-quarter>) could help. She questions “a purist approach that insists on keeping fossil fuel reserves in the ground” instead of embracing, for example, novel

technologies that capture carbon from the air. She more than hints at allying with Big Tech, broken up and regulated by the state (no mention of how this is to be achieved), against the sectors of capital most tied up with fossil fuels.

There is almost no engagement with social struggle here, no sense of challenging the existing social order and the class that rules it. Although Buck mentions the Green New Deal (it's not clear what version of a GND she supports), the spirit of climate justice – fighting for measures that can not only drive down GHG emissions, but also combat inequality and oppression – is missing. What about connecting efforts to reduce emissions to today's other urgent struggles, around jobs, housing, defunding police, and Indigenous land defence, for example? That's the kind of thing climate justice supporters did in France when a tax on diesel fuel triggered [the militant *gilets jaunes* movement](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/09/who-really-are-the-gilets-jaunes) (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/09/who-really-are-the-gilets-jaunes) in 2018. They contributed to challenging right-wing efforts to shape those protests, popularizing the slogan “*Fin du monde, fin du mois, même combat*” (“End of the world [i.e. climate change], end of the month [i.e. poverty], same struggle”). They helped the movement connect ecological issues with social ones, which changed environmental politics in France.

Our climate movements will have to respond to the floods, droughts, fires, pandemics, and other disasters that a deepening ecological crisis will undoubtedly deliver in the years to come. In the Global North, these threats will be accompanied by employers and governments intensifying attacks on wages, working conditions, workplace and civil rights, and public services. We'll need to build a militant mass movement to push the state to implement a just transition from fossil fuels – against the wishes of our rulers – and not accept technocratic approaches in which “asking the state to provide infrastructure for corporations appears to be the most that one might dare to demand,” as British ecosocialist Gareth Dale has put it.

To propose an alliance between climate movements and some sectors of business is what we might call Popular Front climate politics. It's a recent incarnation of the old idea, popularized by the Communist International (Comintern) under Stalinist leadership in the mid-1930s, that the left should seek to build a broad alliance that includes a so-called “progressive” wing of the capitalist class. At best, climate popular-frontism underestimates the hostility of the entire capitalist class towards the important reforms that would be necessary for a just transition away from fossil fuels and other sources of GHG emissions. These reforms include programs to build high-quality public transit and climate-friendly housing on a massive scale, job/income guarantees for displaced workers, programs for the retrofitting of buildings by unionized workers, and high taxes on wealth and corporate income to help fund what needs to be done. That's what a radical GND should include. No section of the capitalist class is going to support such a package of sweeping climate justice reforms, so allying with any section of capital will limit what climate organizers fight for.

Such an alliance would also make it difficult, if not impossible, to reduce energy demand in energy-guzzling rich countries while simultaneously assisting countries of the Global South to use more energy per person, which is necessary to improve lives there. It would obstruct the creation of transit systems that free people from dependence on private vehicles (electric cars are at best a lesser evil) and drastically reduce air travel – really difficult issues in the US, Canada, and other advanced capitalist countries, yes, but unavoidable if we're serious about slashing GHG emissions.

Buck's optimism about technological climate solutions relies on both minimizing such realities of class struggle in a heating world and ceding too much power to capitalist firms to shape our path forward. When she looks to the possibility of “low-carbon fossil fuels” – where “an oil company could decarbonize its production to some extent by eliminating methane leaks, for example, or using carbon capture and storage at refineries” – she suggests continued reliance on fossil fuels could be justified because “the demand for energy will be growing around the world.” Yet, as socialist writer and energy researcher Simon Pirani points out, “demand is not an immutable external force. It is formed in the course of economic activity and could be cut sharply by energy

conservation measures.” Nor are the emerging examples of “low-carbon fossil fuels” Buck cites encouraging. She reports, for instance, that Shell received the first European shipment of “carbon neutral LNG” (liquefied natural gas) this year – but Pirani observes that this was plain old methane. “Shell simply bought some carbon credits to cover it. The [useless, greenwashing character](https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/the-biggest-problem-with-carbon-offsetting-is-that-it-doesnt-really-work/) (<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/the-biggest-problem-with-carbon-offsetting-is-that-it-doesnt-really-work/>) of such credits has been [exposed](https://redd-monitor.org/2020/10/22/interview-with-larry-lohmann-the-corner-house-carbon-markets-do-not-need-to-be-fixed-they-need-to-be-eliminated/) (<https://redd-monitor.org/2020/10/22/interview-with-larry-lohmann-the-corner-house-carbon-markets-do-not-need-to-be-fixed-they-need-to-be-eliminated/>) long ago.”

By publishing arguments like Buck’s, *Jacobin* is offering its many readers a technocratic approach to climate change that accepts too many assumptions of today’s capitalist civilization. Embracing this kind of politics can easily lead to more or less uncritical backing for climate action programs from left-wing Democrats in the US and their social democratic counterparts elsewhere, policies that fall far short of a radical GND. Worse, it can lead to qualified support for right-wing politicians like Biden and Trudeau, who are pushing “[imperialist Keynesian](https://www.tempestmag.org/2021/05/imperialist-keynesianism/)” (<https://www.tempestmag.org/2021/05/imperialist-keynesianism/>) policies – more state spending on construction, renewable energy generation, schooling, social programs, aid to businesses, and more – for reorganizing Western capitalism to compete with China and respond to climate change.

We shouldn’t settle for these inadequate responses to the biggest challenge of our time. Our climate justice politics should cut against the grain of today’s social order: anticipating a future of crises and upheavals, connecting with other struggles, and organizing support for a just transition.



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