

Future on Fire: An Interview with David Camfield

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A group of Tempest Collective members read *Future on Fire: Capitalism and the Politics of Climate Change* by David Camfield. Tempest members **Ricardo Gabriel** and **Nevena Pilipović-Wengler** interviewed David about his book's reflections on just transition, revolutionary organizing, settler colonialism, and more.

David Camfield, who lives in Winnipeg, Canada, hosts the socialist podcast Victor's Children and is a member of the editorial board of Midnight Sun. *Future on Fire* is his newest book.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Nevena Pilipović-Wengler: David, thank you again for chatting with us. Everyone [in our discussion group] who read the book found it accessible and clearly written, and also appreciated how it calls upon us to begin revolutionary organizing today. Can you talk about who your intended audience is and why you thought it was important to write this book for this moment?

David Camfield: So I started to write the book in the course of the mobilization for the [youth climate strike](#) in September of 2019 [part of a global week of protests called by the Fridays for Future movement before a UN Climate Summit], which seems a very long time ago now, politically.

But I was really struck as I was participating in this effort that there were so many people involved. Just for context, because it's so cold in Winnipeg for much of the year, summer is not a time when a lot of people go to political meetings because they're so desperate to enjoy being outside when it's warm.

Yet despite that, there were remarkable numbers of people coming out on summer evenings to be part of this effort. So I had the sense that something was really shifting and moving. And it was true. The number of people who took part in the student climate

strikes of 2019 was pretty remarkable. Some were quite radical and open to radical understandings, but I thought there was a real lack of depth when it came to thinking strategically.

And so I thought, well, I could try to contribute to this movement by writing a short book that would make some of the analysis accessible to people who are committed to climate justice in some sense. And to try to think about the question: well, we all agree we need climate justice, we need just transition, but what would it actually take to achieve that?

So that's the genesis of the book. But things have changed a lot in terms of the political context since 2019.

Ricardo Gabriel: In the United States, the concept of "just transition" is most often used in nonprofit and progressive, though not necessarily anti-capitalist, spaces. One of the important contributions your book makes is that it explicitly defines the idea of a just transition as a transition away from capitalism and towards an ecosocialist future. Can you say more about the importance of developing socialist visions for a just transition?

DC: Okay. So I'll start with [a quote from the book] about just transition:

"[D]rastic and rapid greenhouse gas emission cuts coupled with reforms that reduce injustice—what we can call a radical Green New Deal—represent a minimum emergency program. In rich countries ... this needs to include measures to reduce the brutal squeeze global capitalism puts on countries of the South and assist the majority of people in the world to both use more energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Winning such a Green New Deal in many countries would still not resolve the global ecological crisis. It would not by itself uproot capitalism. Nor would it put an end to the many forms of oppression that are part of the existing social order. In the US, Canada and other settler-colonial societies these include the oppression of Indigenous peoples, which is rooted in dispossession from "land in all its forms" ... However, winning a genuinely just transition would still be an extraordinary victory that would weaken those sources of harm and open up possibilities for more far-reaching change."

So I think that the question then is what kind of struggles would be needed to win a radical Green New Deal? I think that's the real question and whether we use the language of a Green New Deal or not, that's not so important, right?

But what we're actually talking about is a sweeping series of reforms. And I do really think that the question then is, what would it take to actually achieve that? And would the kinds of struggles that would be needed create a crisis with revolutionary possibilities in it?

The book doesn't go into that, but if we think about a just transition in the sense that I'm trying to talk about it, then we could think about it as a demand which responds to an urgent need, which should be fought for through mass struggle regardless of whether it's compatible with capitalism or not.

In the history of the socialist Left, one way of thinking about this would be to think about it as a transitional demand. And what we mean by that is something we could talk about. But again, I think we need to speak to this urgent need for a just transition with people who are thinking about climate justice, and discuss what it would actually take to achieve this. Because I think that's where there are certainly lots of disagreements.

NPW: I think that leads to the bigger question of, how do we get to that just transition? Or using your own language, how do we make those transitional demands?

Your book argues that this needs to be done through mass movements. Our discussion group resonated with this as socialists, but we also recognize how slippery reforms and demands for just transition can be. It's difficult to determine whether a reform's compass points towards a revolution or a further entrenchment of the capitalist state, or a weird mix of both. So what types of reforms or demands for just transition do you think brings us closer to that just transition or revolution?

DC: The way that I think about it is that more important than the demands themselves are the methods of action that people engage in order to achieve them. Because I think that's what's really critical. I mean, you could have a wonderfully radical demand, which we could see as part of a demand for just transition. And then people think, well, the way to get this is by lobbying, right? There's not much potential there, but you could have another demand which might be much more imperfect perhaps from our perspective. But if people are actually galvanized and you get thousands of people going into motion around it, then there's also some potential there. And it's through the process of mass struggle that people change, that we develop our own capacities and build new forms of

organization. We might build the power needed to actually win something.

So I would want us to focus more on thinking about the forms of action that are involved than on the demands themselves in the abstract. And I think that's the compass.

I guess this brings up the idea that people often talk about, of [non-reformist reforms](#). And I'm skeptical that such a thing exists. We can assess the different reform demands brought forward, but I don't think there's any reform that is inherently non-reformist. I don't think that's a problem.

It was Rosa Luxemburg who said that the social revolution is the goal and the struggle for reforms is the means to that end. That's the way I think about it. The question really is: What can we do that will try to get large numbers of people into motion around demands?

Because it's through that process of organizing that people learn and change and can potentially radicalize.

NPW: Are there examples of actions that you think embody this or that you feel inspired by in that regard?

DC: Well, I do think there was tremendous potential building up in the youth climate mobilizations of 2019, just before the pandemic. And then in Canada, a lot of people who were involved in that flowed into solidarity with the [Wet'suwet'en \[a First Nation\] land defense](#) happening in early 2020. That was quite inspiring, and unfortunately, all that tremendous potential was really snuffed out by the impact of the pandemic and everything that happened after that.

There was an international series of mobilizations. And I think we can see now that what the pandemic did was put an end to a world-historic opportunity. Now, the people who participated in that are still there, people had those experiences, and many of those people in the U.S. were probably also involved in the actions in the summer of 2020, and so on.

But that's one experience. I think there've been examples in Europe like the [Ende Gelände \[in German the phrase means "here and no further"\] struggle in Germany](#), which involved mass direct action against coal. That's inspiring. And then more recently, there have been strike actions in France against the attack on the public pension system; you

may have heard how there are some members of the CGT Union (Confédération Générale du Travail, and in English, the General Confederation of Labour) in the power generation sector who [turned off the electricity](#) in a politically targeted way against capital and the government, while leaving it on or making it freely available to other people. So that's something that's inspiring, and we should try to publicize those examples as much as possible.

And one other thing to mention is an experience, which I think is really important and maybe gives us a sense of what might lie ahead. The gilets jaunes (yellow vests), the vast movement in France in late 2018/early 2019, saw large numbers of people involved in very militant action sparked by a neoliberal government bringing in a tax on diesel fuel. This was a movement that had a lot of participants coming out of sectors of the working class and other people who had not been involved in previous anti-austerity struggles—so, not coming out of public sector unions, for example, not being centered in Paris, [or] some of those major cities. A movement that had all sorts of political contradictions in it, and which could have gone to the right politically, but which didn't, in part because of people on the Left who participated in it and helped the movement to move in a more consistently anti-inequality and climate justice direction.

But given the social crises that are happening now and that lie ahead, I think we're going to see more of those kinds of unexpected, unanticipated forms of social protests that sometimes are politically contradictory or ambiguous, but they're not fated to be hijacked or directed by the hard and far right. If people like climate justice supporters and other people on the Left can get involved, listen, and constructively participate, they can try to shape them in a different direction.

RG :In chapter three, you draw from some important historical examples to make the distinction between being in office and being in power, highlighting the limitations of narrow electoral and legislative strategies. Can you say more about why building mass movements from the bottom up is crucial for averting climate catastrophe and ushering in a new ecosocialist society?

DC: Well, I think that mass social movements are crucial because, first of all, otherwise there won't be a just transition. There's also no possibility of a break from capitalism without, to quote Trotsky, "the direct interference of the masses in historic events." So I think we can also say that there may not be much of a transition from fossil fuels at all

without mass social movements.

What we're seeing now is the trend toward expanding renewable energy without phasing out fossil fuels. And then the question is, what fills the gap, right? And that's where unfortunately lies a big threat, such as [solar radiation management](#). It's easy for me to imagine a scenario in which we see a buildout of renewables without an attack on the power of fossil fuel capital. And then the state moves in to introduce solar radiation management to offset the impact of greenhouse gasses to prevent heating, but it's a situation where you might have some kind of energy transition that in no way, shape, or form is a just transition.

So sometimes people understandably, because of how bad things are, can slip from thinking about just transition to just welcoming any transition at all. I think we need to avoid that political mistake because, as we might see in perhaps parts of Europe more so than in the U.S. and Canada, countries would transition away from fossil fuels in a more thorough way but would still be very much within the framework of capitalism. That can easily make people's lives worse in all sorts of ways.

So to change the character of the energy transition, mass social movements that are infused with climate justice politics are going to be absolutely essential. Capital is not going to take us to a just transition.

NPW: No, it is not. Which I think returns us to the movement of the Wet'suwet'en land defense you highlighted that fought against the deeply entrenched, or necessary, relationship between capitalism and colonialism. You incorporate an analysis of settler colonialism in a respectful and insightful way that invites us to continuously hold that analysis as an important perspective and source of knowledge. Can you explain why, from your perspective, it is important for ecosocialists, and countries like Canada and the United States, to take settler colonialism seriously?

DC: First of all, settler colonialism is very much part of the societies in which we're living. It's a specific form of oppression and it was foundational to how the U.S. and Canada were created and how they exist today. So it's not just about events in the past.

This brings up the question of how non-Indigenous socialists should approach this. And I think the starting point needs to be by learning, by listening, by studying, and by doing

that with an awareness that our attitudes about settler colonialism are probably shaped by settler-colonial assumptions, if we're products of a settler colonial society, right? And if we're on that side of the line, when it comes to where the oppression is organized, that's going to tend to shape how we think about these things. Just like, for example, cis men when it comes to gender oppression, our experiences, and perceptions are going to be shaped by living in a society where we don't experience gender oppression. And, in fact, we are conferred advantages on the basis of our gender. So we need to approach it with a sense of humility and self-awareness.

Settler colonialism is a specific kind of oppression. But the struggle to end settler colonialism has implications that are not limited to Indigenous people. Just like, for example, trans liberation has implications for people of all genders. And so the end of settler colonialism would involve a transformation of our relationship to the land, and land understood in the broad sense of the rest of nature that we're part of. So I think there are all sorts of implications. I mean, every form of oppression experienced by a specific group of people has universal implications. I think that's true for settler colonialism as well. There's a lot to be learned there when we think about our vision of liberation and the society that we would like to see arise out of the ashes of capitalism.

And then there's also a strategic issue in the U.S. and Canada, about where Indigenous people are located in relation to the struggle against fossil capital, against extraction. I think that Indigenous resistance has helped prevent things from getting worse by slowing the development of all sorts of fossil extraction projects. That's strategically important. And I think that because of where Indigenous communities are often located, not in urban spaces, they're going to be very much in conflict with the expansion of fossil capital.

We can see this in lots of places, certainly in Canada. Part of the federal government's strategy for trying to improve the performance of Canadian capitalism is to increase the extraction of fossil fuels for export to Asia. And so we see the plans to massively export natural gas from British Columbia, which is the background of the struggles of the Wet'suwet'en people there against the pipeline. And so there's a strategic importance [to these struggles].

I want to quote Nick Estes, the Indigenous socialist, with whom I would have disagreements on lots of questions, but who nevertheless says some things I think are

really important that I quote in the book. He writes,

"Indigenous people are post-apocalyptic. In some cases we've undergone several apocalypses ... I don't want to universalize that experience, it was very unique to us as nations. But if there's something you can learn from Indigenous people, it's what it's like to live in a post-apocalyptic society. In times of great turmoil and destruction, people didn't just stop being humans. They didn't just give up ... They did their best to keep alive the nation through genocide."

I think that those of us who are not survivors of settler-colonial genocide still can learn from that experience. It's got implications for how we think about the future. Readers may find a Marxist article on settler colonialism helpful: ['Are You a Settler? Settler-colonialism, Capitalism and Marxism on Turtle Island'](#) by Brian Ward in the Winter 2020 issue of New Politics.

NPW: Thinking about your answers, and how important organizing is to the mass movements your book calls for, I'm curious—how do you define organizing?

DC: I was really involved in the climate justice work here in Winnipeg from the middle of 2019 till later into 2021. It's amazing how terms like "organizing" can be used—like, everyone wants to say we're doing organizing, not activism, but what do they mean by that? What gets done doesn't change, but the language describing it changes. And certainly, that was true for a lot of stuff in Winnipeg. We had this amazing mobilization in September 2019, and then where do you go? And, of course, the pandemic made it more difficult.

Some of us were pushing to do work around public transit. To do that work well would mean not just relating to or mobilizing the people who are already climate justice supporters. That means where you work, with whom you work, and what you're doing has to change, right? The difference between orienting on people who are self-identified supporters of climate action or climate justice, and orienting on people who are bus-dependent—that's a different way of thinking. It means you have to get out of your bubble.

I think that trying to actually build membership organizations, whether they're workplace or community based, is fundamentally important. And difficult to do, even more difficult to do in the genuinely democratic way that we need to be doing it.

But there's a version that sometimes leads people to a weird refusal to do anything else. So when you have a spontaneous wave of protest, you have some people who are organizing fetishists or something like that who would not want to respond to [mass mobilizations], because it doesn't fit their model of organizing.

That doesn't mean there isn't real insight in that—digging in for the long haul, trying to bring people together, and doing it in ways that involve, as much as possible, a non-reliance on staff. Like, in a union context, which is where I have more experience, the goal is trying to build up members so they can do things without being dependent upon staff or full-time officers. I think that is important in community organizing as well, to reject what I call the [culture of paid activism](#). This is becoming more of an issue in Canada than I think it used to be.

What's really interesting is the way the discussion in Canada is overwhelmingly shaped by the discussion in and texts coming out of the U.S. Canada does not have the same kind of nonprofit industrial complex that exists in the U.S. It's much smaller because there isn't the same 501(c)(3) here. If you have an organization that's doing anything like real organizing, it's very unlikely to have nonprofit status.

So there isn't much of a pathway for people who do their bachelor's degree and then go work for an NGO that claims to be organizing. That's way more common in the U.S. than it is in Canada, which means there isn't a [professional] layer of people who have a material interest in shaping politics because their jobs define that. There are also limitations, such as having way fewer institutions to offer movement education to activists, at least in any way comparable to the system in the U.S. Thus some people look to the U.S. and say, well, this is what we should be trying to replicate here. But then, of course, people encounter [critiques of the nonprofit industrial complex](#).

NPW: I've organized in those spaces that have a more disciplined, yet also rigid or dogmatic organizing model, and I've experienced them as being scared of direct action. You have an interesting section in your book talking about this, whether the possible secrecy of direct actions, such as pipeline destruction, can counter democracy or not. Can you speak more to this point?

DC: I think there's a way that some organizers, especially those who are radicals with a university education, who're working with people who are very different from them can

get very worried that they will drive off the “normal people” [with ideas of more direct or militant actions]. And I think this can lead to operating off of stereotypes, or not recognizing that you need to build real relationships so that there’s a basis to then have discussions about what might be more radical or edgy.

I think this may be influenced by experiences back in the seventies, when some people from the far left got factory jobs and preached at people, then rejected that approach and threw out both the good and the bad from that experience, and assumed that socialist politics had to be this one-way thing, or that it necessarily involved a group of people who thought they had all the answers when they inserted themselves into these other places, in order to become the leadership. And there were so many things that were wrong with the way that was done, especially by Maoists in that era, with thousands of people doing that. But that doesn’t mean attempting to engage in more radical politics with people who haven’t yet arrived at that themselves is the wrong thing to do. It’s more about how we do it.

And also it’s not 1975, right? We’re not dealing with the same working class.

RG: At the end of your book, you write about the need to create new, highly democratic institutions through which the vast majority of people can govern themselves in all spheres of society, and for those institutions to replace those of the existing state. Can you say more about how we begin creating those democratic institutions or practicing democracy in our current organizing struggles? And are there any past or present examples that might serve as guides?

DC: I think the kinds of new democratic institutions through which people can govern themselves can only be created by the upsurge of people who are engaged in enormous feats of self-organization. So we cannot create them in embryo now, but we can practice the maximum democracy possible in our organizing today and try to foster democratic self-organization by ordinary people wherever we can.

A couple of examples that stand out to me come from workers’ struggles in the U.S. in the last few years. In 2012, when the Chicago Teachers Union was on strike, at one point when there was a deal that had been reached, instead of the bargaining committee just accepting the deal and ending the strike, the union continued the strike in order for workers to be able to learn what was in the deal and make a decision about whether

they were prepared to accept it. And in the West Virginia strike by teachers and other education workers in 2018, strikers refused to accept an inadequate deal and just return to work when their leaders said that was the thing to do. Instead, the workers continued a wildcat strike.

I think those examples should inspire us in terms of the kinds of democracy-in-action that we need to try to promote in workplace and community organizing wherever we can, to embody democratic control from below. Because I think there's a logic that connects the democratic organizing of our struggles in the here and now with the future creation of democratic institutions that can replace the institutions of the capitalist state.