

What strategy for the climate justice movement?

By David Camfield
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Our immediate goal in the climate justice movement should be sweeping reforms that slash greenhouse gas emissions, starting a just transition that leaves no one behind, and doing so in ways that fully respect the right of indigenous nations to self-determination. That's what a Green New Deal (GND) should be.

This wouldn't be the full achievement of climate justice! It's a minimum, a set of emergency measures. But winning it would be a historic victory that would open a path to more far-reaching change.

How can we win it? What's our strategy? A strategy is an overall approach to win, different from tactics like, for example, a student strike. It's no good to declare a goal without a serious strategy for achieving it.

Will DIY local initiatives work? No, only the federal government has the power to implement sweeping reforms (that doesn't mean other governments are off the hook). A GND will require change *far* beyond small-scale community initiatives.

Can we persuade the government to do the right thing through rational argument and the moral righteousness voiced by Greta Thunberg and millions of people in September? That's a dead end: as we've seen since 2015, the Liberal Party is a servant of fossil capitalism, an enemy of climate justice (and the Conservatives are worse).

Can we win what we seek by electing the NDP and/or the Green Party? Neither party supports a GND (although a few of their candidates do). We've seen NDP provincial governments in Alberta and BC support the expansion of fossil fuel extraction. In Europe, Green Parties are supporting green capitalism, not climate justice.

What if we could get a party to support a genuine GND and elect them? That's a better idea, but the problem we face goes deeper than party policy. The governments we elect are *in office, in not power!* So much power is wielded by people who are never elected.

Capital has enormous influence. It's not just fossil fuel corporations like the eight powerful firms at the centre of the tar sands. Banks and investment funds are invested in those extraction firms so they have a stake in the profits from fossil fuels. If a government moved to implement a GND it would face intense opposition from most of the capitalist class.

There would also be opposition from other powerful unelected people like top civil servants and the heads of the Bank of Canada, the RCMP and CSIS. They all serve the profit-driven status quo, and they don't want "instability."

This means that the only way to win climate justice reforms is a powerful mass social movement that *forces* the government to deliver! To quote The Red Nation, an indigenous group based in New Mexico, "Our leverage is people. Leverage comes from a movement behind you. Only when people move do we build enough power to force concessions and eventually win."

So we need a mass social movement. Only a mass social movement would have the power needed to win. The protests we experienced on September 27 give us a taste of what such a movement would be like. But a mass social movement is much more than a day of protest: it would involve many hundreds of thousands of people engaged in sustained action through different organizations, like many streams flowing into a mighty river. If you want an example of a mass movement, think of the student movement in Quebec in 2012 that grew beyond students.

The greatest source of power of a mass social movement is its ability to disrupt business as usual by using mass direct action on a large scale. This can non-violently disrupt the normal operation of public institutions, as student strikes do to schools when enough students participate, and as strikes by public sector workers do. It's important for us to know that teachers at a number of CEGEPs in Quebec and student academic workers at UQAM defied the law and struck for climate justice on September 27. Mass direct action can also disrupt the flow of profits, as we see when private sector workers strike or when people blockade railways or highways.

The truth is we don't yet have a mass social movement, and the protests of September 27 were far from the mass direct action that's needed. Our task as supporters of climate justice is to work to build a growing movement that uses mass direct action and fights to win. We can use different tactics to do that.

We need to persuade more of the growing numbers of people who want climate action that we need to do more than slash greenhouse gas emissions. We have to change society in ways that put people before profit to limit climate change. We also need to persuade people concerned about inequality, poverty and oppression to unite for climate justice.

So let's go forward, holding in our minds and hearts that our lives and the lives of those not yet born are worth more than their profits!

This is based on a presentation at the Building a Climate Justice Movement forum held in Winnipeg on October 10, 2019. Thanks to Sunny Enkin Lewis for the request that led me to write up my speaking notes.