

The “Green New Deal” and Indigenous, Labor, Environmental Alliances in Washington State

A Green Syndicalist Analysis

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A compelling coalition of labor, environmental, and Indigenous activists has developed in Washington State around a campaign for social, economic, and environmental justice. The Alliance for Jobs and Clean Energy brings together dozens of groups working on these issues. Recognizing the disproportionately negative impacts of ecological crises on racialized communities, the alliance, specifically, includes around 60 organizations addressing economic and political issues in communities of color that have formed a coalition called Front and Centered.

The focus of the alliance is the Protect Washington Act, or ballot initiative 1631, a effort to legislatively address issues of climate crisis and economic injustice in the state. Workers see a prospect of creating tens of thousands of new jobs with very high labor standards, and healthier environments, written right into the terms of investment. Indigenous communities see possibilities for supports for pressing environmental protection work.

A Green New Deal?

The ballot initiative is supported by an economic assessment from the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts. It calls for large scale reductions in CO2 emissions of 20 million tons per year. By 2035, CO2 emissions would be 40 percent lower than they were in 2014.

Beyond this, the initiative would place a carbon-emissions fee on major polluters, and would use the billions of dollars in revenue collected for a series of investments in clean energy and water. The proposal would see that money directed to employers with a high-wage, labor-protection model. And significantly, money would be earmarked to be spent on the economic, environmental, and health-care restoration of those communities most negatively impacted and threatened by global climate change. Some examples of programs would include low-income energy-assistance programs and there would be job retraining and wage and benefit protections for workers in fossil-fuel-reliant industries over the course of a generation while those industries are phased out.

There will also be resources made available for Indigenous communities deeply feeling impacts of ecological crises and dealing with pressing impacts from climate change. As one example, the Quinault Indian Nation, on Washington's Olympic Peninsula coast, is seeing its historic burial grounds and sacred sites inundated with sea water rises. Portions of its ancestral lands around the coastal villages of Taholah and Queets are already becoming uninhabitable. If ballot initiative 1631 passes, there will be more resources and funds available to protect habitat and develop greater resilience.

Supporters are calling this a Green New Deal. The idea is to use money raised through the \$15 per ton fee on CO2 emissions to create so-called glide paths to full retirement for workers in fossil fuel industries within five years of retiring. So, for workers who had worked in these industries for between one and five years, there would be a year of guaranteed income, health care, and retirement contributions for every year worked by that worker. Workers who had worked in the fossil fuel industry for more than five years would be covered with a wage insurance program for up to five years to make up for any income difference between their wages in the fossil fuel industry and the new wages in a non-fossil fuel industry. The aim is to have a just transition to new work rather than simply retraining.

The Western States Petroleum Association and conservative PACs are already lining up to throw millions behind a “No on 1631” campaign. So clearly some of them see some initial costs.

Promise and Problems

The main positive aspects of this sort of campaign are educational and relational. First, they can be educational in developing knowledge, practical awareness, and tactical insights for workers and environmentalists that their struggles are shared as a step in moving beyond the still potent “jobs versus environment” false choice promoted by capital and politicians (as in the pipeline debates in Canada currently). They can teach workers and environmentalists about shared points of interest and intersections of issues. They can also offer potentially important opportunities for all to learn about Indigenous communities, struggles for sovereignty, and land defense, among others.

Second, these campaigns have a potentially significant relational aspects as workers, environmentalists, and Indigenous people (recognizing these are not mutually exclusive) organize together and build real relationships in shared campaign work.

These first two benefits are only realized where the work goes beyond the ballot perspectives and where that specific campaign is seen for being as limited as it is. That is, the campaign cannot be viewed as a real solution to ecological crises.

From a green syndicalist perspective, workers, environmentalists, and Indigenous people working together, strategizing together, is a positive development. It can lead to more radical, thoroughgoing approaches to stop ecological destruction.

But addressing ecological crises (beyond climate crisis) must challenge relations of ownership, control, production, and exchange. Otherwise, the planet and labor will continue to be used as resources, commodities, for exploitation and accumulation. And ecological crises will be extended by new means.

Worker, community control and Indigenous land struggles challenge the fundamental relations of ownership, control, production in which ecological crises are rooted and reproduced.

Conclusion

Initiatives like this campaign also take real power out of and away from its source and put it in the hands of a mediator—the state—that is never neutral and in issues like this always acts on behalf of capital and capitalist conditions of exploitation and profit. These do nothing to change property relations, labor relations, production regimes, decision making hierarchies.

Like the original “New Deal” from which this initiative takes its nickname, such statist projects are about the preservation of capitalism, from crises of its own making, rather than an end, or even phase out of capitalism. So this will likely be another mechanism for state capitalist regulation and management—for accumulation and reintegration of labor for exploitation. In addition, as is being given more attention, the original New Deal work projects served to break down and replace local, community-based mutual aid efforts and substitute statist projects.

It is not even clear what real impact such legislation will have on what it is trying to address. Companies can lobby to recoup these costs with other means (such as taxation). As we have seen in Canada, subsequent governments can simply cancel or modify such legislation—as has

happened with carbon pricing in Ontario, cancelled by Doug Ford's class war Conservative government.

If the coalition can evolve its alliances in directions suggestive of autonomy, solidarity, and self-determining action, which it still could, then there are real possibilities here. At the very least the prospects of something more (coordinated action building workplace and community power and controls) might move beyond the limitations of the ballot campaign as those become clear.

*The description of initiative 1631 is informed by Sasha Abramsky, "This Washington State Ballot Measure Fights for Both Jobs and Climate Justice" in *The Nation*, August 13-20, 2018

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