

“It’s Eco-Socialism or Death”

AN INTERVIEW WITH

KALI AKUNO

Cooperation Jackson leader Kali Akuno on the Green New Deal, the need for mass civil disobedience, and the necessity of building an internationalist movement for eco-socialism.

This article is part of *Jacobin's* Green New Deal series. The rest of the pieces in the series can be read [here](#).

INTERVIEW BY

EDITORS

The Green New Deal (GND) is now part of the national conversation. But for decades, social movements have been doing the on-the-ground work to resist fossil capitalism and envision a different future. Such grassroots social mobilization — but at a massive scale — is vital to ensuring the GND catalyzes transformative social change.

Cooperation Jackson is at the forefront of eco-socialist organizing to create a new society and economy from the bottom up. Cooperation Jackson encompasses a network of worker cooperatives and supporting institutions fighting to build a solidarity economy in Mississippi and beyond. *Jacobin's* Green New Deal editorial team spoke with Kali Akuno, the cofounder and executive director of Cooperation Jackson, and coeditor of *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, MS*.

In this wide-ranging interview, we discussed the links between local eco-socialist

action, national movement-building, and an internationalist orientation; tactics and strategies for interacting with electoral politics to radicalize the GND — and much more. Throughout, Akuno draws on a long history of environmental justice activism in the United States and around the world, providing key lessons about how to move forward — and quickly — to generate a militant, mass movement for a just planet.

EDITORS We're in an interesting political moment where there's a lot of excitement around a GND coming from insurgent left-wing Democrats, but also a lot of pushback from centrists in the party who have a lot of power, as we saw in Nancy Pelosi's move to weaken the Select Committee on a GND. How can we be strategic about interacting with different representatives and power players? Looking forward to 2020, how can we orient ourselves towards the most radical GND possible?

KALI AKUNO Organizing is the answer. We have to organize a strong independent base to advance the transition program we need, be it the Green New Deal or anything similar. Without that this epic issue will be held hostage to forces seeking to maintain the capitalist system as is, whether it be the Democratic or Republican variety of this worldview and its articulated interests. And we have to build this base to advance two strategies at once.

One, we have to organize a mass base within the working class, particularly around the job-focused side of the just transition framework. We have to articulate a program that concretely addresses the class's immediate and medium-term need for jobs and stable income around the expansion of existing "green" industries and the development of new ones, like digital fabrication or what we call community production, that will enable a comprehensive energy and consumption transition. This will have to be a social movement first and foremost, which understands electoral politics as a tactic and not an end unto itself.

For our part, one of the critical initiatives that we as Cooperation Jackson are arguing for is the development of a broad "union-co-op" alliance that would seek to unite the three forms of the organized working-class movement in this country — i.e. the trade unions, workers' centers, and worker cooperatives — around what we call a "build and fight" program. It would seek to construct new worker-owned and self-managed enterprises rooted in sustainable methods of production on the build side and to enact various means of appropriation of the existing enterprises by their workers on the fight side, which would transition these industries into sustainable practices (or in some cases phase them out entirely). We think this is a means towards building the independence that is required to dictate the terms of the political struggle in the

electoral arena.

The second strategy calls for mass civil disobedience, as we witnessed at Standing Rock. We have to recognize that the neoliberal and reactionary forces at the heart of the Democratic Party are only part of the problem. The main enemy is and will be the petrochemical transnationals. We have to weaken their ability to extract, and this entails stopping new exploration and production initiatives. This is critical because it will weaken their power, particularly their financial power, which is at the heart of their lobbying power. If we can break that, we won't have to worry about the centrists, as you put it.

EDITORS Cooperation Jackson is a local project, and a lot of the most exciting left projects now are local or municipal. The Green New Deal is likely to involve a lot of money that will ultimately be spent by local bodies. Yet the history of the US, including the New Deal, includes a lot of examples of local institutions actually defending inequalities and privileges from federal intervention, whereas something like what W. E. B. Dubois called "abolition democracy" required federal back-up. How do you think about the role of decentralization and the federal government in terms of a Green New Deal, especially in the early years?

KALI AKUNO Cooperation Jackson is a locally situated project, as you noted, but we see ourselves as part of an international, or more appropriately, several international movements. I say this because we don't think the answers to the questions posed are local or national; they are of necessity global. We have to build an international movement to stop runaway climate change and the sixth great extinction event that we are living through right now. There is no way around that.

One of the reasons why we have to build a powerful international movement is to fortify our national, regional, and local movements against the reactionary threats and counter-movements that exist throughout the US, but that are extremely concentrated in places like Mississippi. For instance, on a practical level, being connected to an array of international forces helps give cover to our work in Jackson. We can bring various types of pressure to bear on local reactionary forces whose constant threats against us can be mitigated (to varying degrees) by acts of economic and political reprisal by our international (and national) allies.

To the extent that the Green New Deal becomes policy, and is rooted in a radical just transition framework, it will make a significant contribution toward addressing the climate crisis as it transforms energy and consumption practices in the US, particularly those of the government, which is one of the leading carbon emitters on the planet. However, in order for the Green New Deal to be effective in its implementation, it is going to have to be extremely nuanced to address the situated racial and class inequalities that are at the heart of your question.

So for instance, barring a major radical transformation of the Mississippi government (and society), we in Jackson would need a direct relationship with the federal government to ensure access to the federal resources provided by the Green New Deal. Under present conditions, if those resources were allocated to the state government alone, you best believe that Jackson would only receive a fraction of those resources — if that. The primary reason being the ongoing structural intersections between settler colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy that continue to define the US as a project.

Therefore, in order to be effective, the Green New Deal must not be one-dimensional in its orientation — i.e., only concern itself with reducing carbon emissions, without taking into account how to address and overcome the racial, class, gender, and regional-based inequities in this society.

EDITORS Cooperation Jackson has been working on cooperative agricultural models. What role should food sovereignty movements play in the GND, in terms of agricultural production methods?

KALI AKUNO A significant part of the sixth extinction event is the rapid loss of habitat and corresponding ecological destruction that countless species have suffered the past two hundred years. We have to, and I stress have to, figure out a way to severely restrict our habitat (i.e. land) use and engage in some major ecological restoration.

The challenge is how to produce more food, on smaller plots of land, without resorting to genetic modification. We haven't figured this out, to my mind. Not even close. I think permaculture points us in the right direction, as does some degree of small-scale agriculture to at least break the stranglehold the monopolies currently have. I also think we will need to maximize urban density, fairly significantly, to enable more habitats to be recuperated for other species and to restore ecological balance and the replenishment of the soil, which are major carbon sinks. In doing this we will have to turn our urban spaces into “living farms” to address many of our caloric needs.

The Green New Deal is going to have to address this challenge head on and leave ample room for experimentation, but an experimentation that intentionally breaks the power of the monopolies and creates new incentives for production that are not profit-driven or bound.

EDITORS You've been very lucid on the problem of productivism that's implicit in a lot of Green New Deal proposals. One way some of us have tried to address this issue is by emphasizing other kinds of work, like care work. Another idea out there is to transition huge amounts of the workforce toward part-time work — that is, to distribute existing work more evenly. What are some of the ways you think we should finesse a jobs guarantee to avoid reproducing capitalist and/or socialist

productivist politics?

KALI AKUNO The Left has to start positioning itself around improving the overall quality of life of the working class, the oppressed, and humanity as a whole. A broader distribution of work is a necessary step in this direction without question, and it's not only the right direction, but the imperative one. However, this has to be combined with forms of solidarity exchange to improve the quality of life of the majority of humanity. This is where things like time-banking on a mass scale can and should come in. As well as the overall expansion of the commons.

To my mind, this will also entail transitional measures, such as a universal basic income (UBI). I say transitional because instituting a UBI without socializing the means of production would only serve to reproduce the capitalist logic of accumulation and the unequal relationships that are necessary for its reproduction.

Ultimately, I think we are going to have to develop a comprehensive and democratic planning system that equitably distributes the essential goods and services we all need to survive and thrive. And to be clear, I'm not arguing for a return to the centralized state-capitalist economies of the twentieth century, but the democratic socialization of the emergent information-based exchange economies, and that would utilize technological innovations to create a regenerative economy.

This would entail, at least in its early stages, various rules and limits, to make sure that exchanges stay within scientific and social limits related to resource extraction and energy utilization, until they become normative – which would take a few generations to undo the century of conspicuous consumption that has been advanced and promoted by late capitalism.

EDITORS You've pointed to indigenous leadership in stopping pipelines at places like Standing Rock and argued we need to "scale up our campaigns against the oil companies," including through direct action. Others have called for nationalizing and shutting down oil and gas companies. What does scaling up the fight against fossil-fuel companies look like? What's the political path to taking down these incredibly rich and powerful companies?

KALI AKUNO As I noted, the type of direct action that we witnessed at Standing Rock is where we are going to have to go. The march of death that the petrochemical companies are leading us on leaves us with no other choice.

There are some critical steps that must be taken before we get to that level of mass direct action on an ongoing basis. We have to do a much more thorough job of getting the masses of people to understand the severity of the crisis *and* our collective ability to do something about it. We have some hearts and minds to win; and we have to defeat the notion that capitalism can't be defeated. It's going to be hard, but it's not

an immutable system.

The forces of reaction are doing everything within their power to make the direct action we've seen over the last decade explicitly illegal. They are going to escalate their brutality. Standing Rock should have taught us that. Indeed, many land, water, and sky protectors are already getting killed throughout the Global South.

We are going to have to get people to understand that preserving life on this planet is well worth the sacrifices that thousands if not millions of us are going to have to consciously make, by throwing our bodies directly on the line against the system. We are at the midnight hour, and it's eco-socialism or death. We have to be clear about what it will entail to eliminate the current system.

This type of consciousness-raising has to precede options such as nationalization as a means of liquidating fossil capital. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't introduce the idea and use it as a motivating factor, but we have to be real that it is going to take millions of people acting in accord with one another to make this option a concrete reality.

EDITORS You've been active in the environmental justice movement for a long time. What lessons do you draw from that work? What kinds of strategies and coalitions have been most effective? What can we learn from the people who have been fighting on this for a long time about how to take on powerful industries?

KALI AKUNO To be honest, the answer to this question would take a book. Let me redirect the question a bit. It is time that we seriously appreciate the insights of groups like Earth First!. In terms of social movement development, they were ahead of their time. Our challenge now is figuring out how to scale them up significantly and in a very short period of time — within five years, because we only have a decade at best to get this right.

We need to reevaluate the differences in outcomes between the ecologically oriented movements of the 1960s and 1970s from those of the 1990s to the present. It is no accident that the most significant environmental legislation yet passed in the US, like the Endangered Species Act, the construction of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air Act, were passed in the late 1960s and early 1970s — and by Richard Nixon no less. These acts were passed on the basis of the strength and militancy of the social movements of the era, which posed a direct threat to the system.

The ecological movements of the 1990s to the present have not benefited from coexisting with strong, militant movements amongst broad layers of the oppressed and the working class. In the absence of these latter movements, the struggles against environmental racism and for climate justice have had to rely on lobbying to address

their demands. This has in turn forced these movements to rely on “good politicians,” rather than creating conditions that the system had to respond to — or else. We have to build movements that have the size, clarity, strength, and determination to pose clear “or else” threats.

EDITORS Internationalism is one of the principles of Cooperation Jackson, and you’ve emphasized the importance of internationalism on climate in particular. What would it look like to build internationalist policies into a GND? And what examples of political projects in the Global South — of eco-socialism, just transitions, sustainable agriculture, cooperatives, energy democracy, etc. — do you find inspiring or exciting? How can leftists in the US connect to, support, and learn from those projects?

KALI AKUNO Another excellent question. I will mention four critical policies:

1. Policies that create international mechanisms and institutions that work directly with indigenous peoples and communities in the rainforest regions of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Oceania to stop the operations of multinational mining, petrochemical, agricultural, fishing, and medical corporations. These policies would need to explicitly counter the United Nations Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN REDD) program — not because we are haters of the United Nations, but because this program is rooted in neoliberal logic and is a reintroduction of colonial practices that threaten to displace millions of indigenous peoples from their lands.
2. Policies that promote the development of open source technologies to directly transfer technology and information to peoples throughout the world. This will enable communities to produce the new carbon-reducing or carbon-neutral technologies that are innovated locally, thus eliminating the need for long-distance trade that would fuel more carbon emissions.
3. Policies that will end the international operations of the US-based petrochemical, mining, agricultural, fishing, and medical transnational monopolies. This will enable local production of essential goods and services when and where needed and put a halt to the extraction and accumulation regimes that currently dominate our planet.
4. Policies that eliminate the impositions of the World Trade Organization (WTO) that negate national and local sovereignty, which has been detrimental to the introduction of major climate mitigation initiatives in the US and Canada.

There are no shortage of political projects occurring in the Global South addressing the climate crisis and the broad range of topics that you mention. I have been deeply

inspired by movements in Micronesia and the Maldives to force the world to deal with the fact that their island homelands are disappearing as we speak. Their direct-action engagements at various UN and international functions have been heart-wrenching and eye-opening. There are a few explicitly eco-socialist movements in the Global South that I am aware of. The most developed in my view are in South Africa, Venezuela, and Bolivia. The critical thing about the movements in these countries is that they have put the question of climate change and the regeneration of the ecology on their national agendas.

And finally, it is imperative for our movements here in the Global North to be intentional about connecting with the movements in the Global South. In many respects, the movements in the Global South are far more advanced than those in the Global North, especially in terms of their political consciousness, organizational development, membership, and social bases. However, what many of the movements in the Global South don't possess are the resources we have at our disposal in the Global North — and I don't just mean financial resources, but varying degrees of infrastructure, like widespread access to electricity and telecommunications services.

In thinking about how to build a new international, we have to think strategically about how best to utilize our respective strengths to overcome our respective weaknesses. We need to draw on the political and organizing strengths of our comrades in the Global South, understanding that we will have to adapt them to our respective context and all the social struggle that will entail, while also figuring out how to transfer our own strengths, if only by providing them with greater resource and media access to speak and act on their own behalf to the wider world.

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