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Living, Not Just Surviving

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Working-class movements must place social and ecological reproduction at the heart o their vision of the future.

When Donald Trump announced plans to pull the United States out of the Paris Climate Accord this June, liberals cried doom. Venture capitalist and Tesla CEO Elon Musk finally resigned from Trump's economic advisory council. Goldman Sachs chief executive Lloyd Blankfein took to Twitter for the first time to express his disappointment, while former ambassador to the UN Samantha Power tweeted that it was "the end of the American Century." Spotting an opportunity, French president Emmanuel Macron, vying with Justin Trudeau for global leader of The Resistance, vowed to "make our planet great again."

From their perspective, the decision appeared a radical shift in climate policy undertaken by the mercurial and proudly ignorant Trump — the opposite of the cool-headed wonkery espoused by Barack Obama, who had declared climate change a "genuine existential threat" (at a private fundraiser on Martha's Vineyard). But the decision marked the outgrowth of Obama's efforts to address climate change while avoiding politics.

In true technocratic fashion, Obama sought a fix through executive orders, administrative measures, and elite international negotiations. His Clean Power Plan relied on the power of the presidency to reduce emissions by further regulating power plants and raising fuel standards using the Clean Air Act and the Environmental Protection Agency. In his final year in office, he made much of brokering an international agreement at the COP 21 in Paris — the first global climate agreement since Kyoto in 1997.

But his achievement was overstated, and so was liberal panic over its demise. The agreement fell far short of what climate scientists and activists alike agree would be necessary to avoid a dangerous 2°C or higher warming — not least because Obama himself had pushed for it to be non-binding. Even implementing the set of commitments made in Paris would have required sustained political action, regardless of who controlled the Oval Office.

Paradoxically, Obama also got more blame for regulatory attempts than he probably deserved. Stricter emissions regulations are just one reason the demand for coal has been declining: activists have campaigned for the closing of coal-fired power plants and the prices of both solar power and natural gas have been plummeting. But Obama provided a convenient scapegoat for coal country's continued decline — after all, he'd done little to alleviate the crisis of unemployment and need in places once dependent on the resource. The path was clear for someone like Donald Trump to run on a platform of bringing mining jobs back — even if he had no actual way of doing so.

The desire to move more quickly than the current state of Congress allows is understandable — we're rapidly running out of time. But climate change is too major an issue to address with tweaks and nudges. Serious action on climate can't avoid politics — it has to confront it head on.

Trump isn't the first to exploit tensions between workers and environmentalists, and he's unlikely to be the last. In response, the Left needs to offer a program that reveals those tensions as a false choice, one offered on capital's terms. We can do that by offering a climate plan that improves people's lives in ways they can understand and that they're willing to fight for. That doesn't mean just focusing on workers in the most traditional vestiges of the fossil fuel economy, though, or even on the kinds of green-energy and infrastructure jobs typically offered as replacements. Rather, it means organizing the working class as it exists today — the nurses and teachers, care workers and service workers who are already doing the work that will be foundational to a low-carbon society oriented toward the flourishing of all, and who can lead the way to a future whose glory can last a lot longer than thirty years.

What would that society look like? In general, it will mean less work all around. But the kind of work that we'll need more of in a climate-stable future is work that's oriented toward sustaining and improving human life as well as the lives of other species who share our world. That means teaching, gardening, cooking, and nursing: work that makes people's lives better without consuming vast amounts of resources, generating significant carbon emissions, or producing huge amounts of stuff.

As it turns out, it is also work that a growing number of people do. "I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris," Trump famously said in his speech announcing the withdrawal. It was a clear signal to his supporters in the Rust Belt — the only problem is that Pittsburgh hasn't been a steel town for decades. Most jobs today are not in coal, steel, or manufacturing, but what's often known as "eds and meds": health care and education.

Pittsburgh illustrates a broader trend: though the hard-hat vision of the working class retains a surprisingly tight grip on political imagination, the fastest growing sectors of the economy are in industries characterized by "pink collar" labor — nursing, teaching, service work. Green jobs boosters often note that there are more jobs in solar-panel installation than coal mining these days — but there are also more teachers, home health aides, and child-care providers. These jobs are done disproportionately by women, immigrants, and people of color.

Organizing these workers would be the way forward for socialists under any circumstances. Under the dire circumstances we face, insisting that the work they do is crucial not only to a just and decent society but an ecologically viable one is the way to win back our future. Labor movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries insisted that workers had built the world in the most literal sense. The labor movement of the twenty-first century needs to foreground the workers who will make it possible for us to live in it.

To put it plainly: pink-collar jobs are green jobs.

Of course, while there are synchronicities between ecological imperatives and feminized labor, they aren't necessarily aligned. Care work may be low-carbon — but that doesn't mean the industries which rely on it are. Hotel workers, for example, are highly unionized, but the hotel industry, reliant as it is on frequent flyers, would suffer without fossil fuels.

Las Vegas, for example, is leading the way in service-worker organizing, but it's hardly a model for an ecologically sustainable world. Organizing fast food and retail workers is likewise critical, but McDonald's and Forever 21 aren't much more ecologically defensible than ExxonMobil. Sometimes that will mean transformations in the way work is organized; often it will mean simply doing less of it. That should be the case even for jobs that aren't as heavily resource-intensive: care work can be rewarding — but it can also be tedious, boring, emotionally taxing, and physically straining.

Meanwhile, transitioning to an economy centered on social reproduction will require a real reckoning with the ways that the work of serving others has been shaped by gender and race. There may be jobs making beds and washing the elderly, but that doesn't mean that the mostly male workers who have spent decades working in factories, on oil rigs, or in coal mines will be able, or willing, to do them. But they might be more likely to do so if the work of social reproduction were better paid and recognized.

In the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, sanitation workers (crucial to any eco-socialist society!) famously declared "I Am a Man," while demanding better wages and better working conditions. In doing so, they challenged a system of segregated labor that had left them to do the dirtiest work, insisting on both social equality and material gains. Reorganizing social reproduction more broadly would require a similar challenge to the status of work that's traditionally been done by women, and especially women of color.

That is to say, facing climate change will require the building but also the transformation of working-class movements. Italy's 1970s autonomist movement provides a helpful perspective: as hikes in the cost of living spiraled above the pace of wage increases, working-class communities recognized that the struggle had to be continued outside the factory. They fought to reduce the cost not only of necessities like rent, transportation, and groceries, but luxuries like the opera; they squatted disused buildings and made them into community centers, imagining libraries, clinics, gyms, and theaters in places where such amenities were nowhere to be found. They insisted that working-class people, too, had the right to a good quality of life.

Yet autonomist projects, though often organized in conjunction with radical wings of labor unions, tended to be sporadic and piecemeal in implementation. By the 1980s, they had mostly disintegrated.

Today, stagnant wages and a rising cost of living are likewise making both necessities and luxuries unaffordable for most. Class struggle in the era of climate change isn't just in the Ninth Ward after Katrina or the Rockaways after Sandy — it's in the rhythms of daily life. It's in nursing homes and schools, on the bus and in the street. The contemporary challenge, then, is to take up autonomist fights over social reproduction — but to carry them forward on a more institutional level while also extending them beyond the factory and the social to a new level: the ecological.

That process is already underway. As Nancy Fraser argues, "if you put together struggles for a shorter workweek, for an unconditional basic income, for public child-care, for the rights of migrant domestic workers and workers who do care work in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals, child-care centers — then add struggles over clean water, housing, and environmental degradation, especially in the global South — what it adds up to . . . is a demand for some new way of organizing social reproduction."

Organizing reproduction in a new way means making the work of our daily survival less onerous and more pleasurable. It means creating and maintaining spaces of communal luxury and collective leisure — lush public parks and gardens, beautiful spaces for recreation and relaxation, art and culture accessible to all. It means not only building housing in dense urban centers but making sure working-class people can actually afford to live there; it means supporting more public transit not only in cities but in the sprawling suburbs where a growing number of working-class people live and in the rural communities where isolation exacerbates social and economic crises. It means addressing the labor shortages at the heart of the rural crisis of care. It means programs like universal health care and free college that simultaneously expand access to public goods and the scope of the low-carbon economy.

The New Deal had elements of such a future in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which put young men to work creating and maintaining national parks, and the Federal Art, Music, Theater, and Writers' Projects, which provided grants to support a wide range of artists. These kinds of programs, combined with the social-welfare programs of the Great Society, would make for a society that provides both the necessities of social provision and an abundance of natural and cultural delights.

A renewed, permanent version of the CCC could extend the caring economy to our planet. In rural areas, it could create new hiking trails, campgrounds, and nature reserves; in cities, it could support the creation and maintenance of city parks and community gardens that can help make dense urban spaces livable and breathable even as temperatures rise. Across the country, it could restore areas that have long been damaged by fossil fuel extraction and other industrial activities. The original CCC employed thousands of Native Americans, often undertaking projects determined by tribal councils; a revived version could be paired with a program for native sovereignty and control over indigenous lands. On a bleaker note, as

climate change progresses, we'll need more people trained to deal with forest fires, floods, and other kinds of extreme weather.

The experience of recent years shows that the Left can grow and win on robust and ambitious platforms that address issues ranging from access to housing and education to medical benefits and elder care. Integrated more closely with an ecological analysis, they represent the building blocks of an eco-socialist platform.

One early vision of what this kind of program might look like is laid out in Canada's Leap Manifesto, a document produced by a cluster of labor, environmental, and indigenous groups. The Manifesto advocates in plain terms for an economy centered on "caring for one another and caring for the planet." That would mean working less time for higher wages, and spending the time we saved with our loved ones and communities; orienting the work we do toward ending racial and gender inequality; generating energy without destroying ecosystems; and creating ownership structures that return wealth to people and communities rather than extracting it from them. The Manifesto places the work of social and ecological reproduction at the heart of its vision of the future; its vanguard are those whose work has been feminized and undervalued. It is a program that is politically savvy on the terrain of existing politics, involving existing organizations, while also imagining a future that breaks sharply with the present.

We should follow that example and work to envision both the future we want and the forces that can get us there — and then get organized. We can keep the planet habitable by building a livable world, but we don't have any time to waste.