# A Red Deal

BY
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The Green New Deal can connect every struggle to climate change. A Red Deal can build on those connections, tying Indigenous liberation to the fight to save the planet.

2016 was the hottest year on record — so far. It also marked historic Indigenous-led protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock.

But Indigenous resistance didn't begin or end there. What did begin there was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's successful bid for Congress, and an Indigenous-led movement that galvanized the popular forces behind the Green New Deal, legislation that she introduced with Senator Ed Markey earlier this year. Ocasio-Cortez is herself a Water Protector, having visited the prayer camps, and Standing Rock was part of a recent constellation of Indigenous uprisings across North America and the US-occupied Pacific: Unist'ot'en Camp (2010), Keystone XL (2011), Idle No More (2012), Trans Mountain (2013), Enbridge Line 3 (2014), Save Oak Flat (2015), Protect Mauna Kea (2015), Nihígaal Bee Iiná (2015), and Bayou Bridge (2017), among many others.

Each movement rises *against* colonial and corporate extractive projects. But what's often downplayed is the revolutionary potency of what Indigenous resistance stands *for*: caretaking and creating just relations between human and nonhuman worlds on a planet thoroughly devastated by capitalism.

After all, the image of the Water Protector and the slogan "water is life," which

were popularized at Standing Rock, are icons of this generation's climate justice movement. And both are political positions not exclusively Indigenous, but grounded in decolonization. If Indigenous movements are foundational to climate justice, then why isn't decolonization as well?

The Green New Deal (GND), which looks and sounds like eco-socialism, offers a real chance at galvanizing popular support for both. While anti-capitalist in spirit and paying lip service to decolonization, it must go further — and so too must the movements that support it.

That's why the Red Nation, a Native resistance organization I helped cofound in 2014, recently drafted a skeleton outline of what we're calling the Red Deal, focusing on Indigenous treaty rights, land restoration, sovereignty, self-determination, decolonization, and liberation. We don't envision it as a counter program to the GND but rather going beyond it — "'Red' because it prioritizes Indigenous liberation, on one hand, and a revolutionary left position on the other."

The GND has the potential to connect every social justice struggle — free housing, free health care, free education, green jobs — to climate change. Likewise, the Red Deal places anti-capitalism *and* decolonization as central to each social justice struggle as well as climate change. The necessity of such a program is grounded in both the history and future of this land, and it entails the radical transformation of all social relations between humans and the earth.

## Between "New Deals"

Indigenous history provides a useful guide on the pitfalls of "new deals." The first New Deal — or the Indian New Deal, as it was known — had mixed results. It brought jobs to reservations that never had them, improved infrastructure or built

it where it was absent, and, in some instances, partially restored buffalo herds that had been annihilated by the military and hunters a generation ago.

The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act ended allotment and repealed a ban on dancing and spiritual practices. It also provided the means to create federally recognized tribal councils, which, in some cases, replaced customary governments.

"The Sioux had climbed from absolute deprivation to mere poverty," Standing Rock intellectual Vine Deloria Jr said, describing the changes for his people, "and it was the best time the reservation ever had."

Elsewhere it was an engineered nightmare. In the Navajo Nation, Indian agents slaughtered more than half the reservation's livestock. This included about half a million sheep that provided not only income and food but had also been integrated as a central facet of Diné culture and worldview. It was a top-down environmental conservation plan that came directly from Washington, with the logic that settlers can manage Native lands and lives better than Native people.

In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt authorized the National Industrial Recovery Act, and with it an Army Corps of Engineers project to construct the Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River, providing employment for ten thousand white workers to pull Montana's economy out of the gutter. Hailed as a beacon of progress and a savior of the region, hydroelectricity was the era's shimmering "renewable energy." The largest dam on earth at the time of its completion, Fort Peck removed 350 Dakota, Nakota, and Assiniboine families from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. *LIFE* magazine's first ever cover story featured a photo spread of the dam's transient work camp, capturing the rugged ethos of the time. One photo depicted a well-dressed white woman taking a shot of liquor at a bar. Above her hung a portrait of FDR captioned "A GALLANT LEADER" next to a sign that read "NO BEER SOLD TO INDIANS."

Fort Peck's success galvanized widespread support for the 1944 Pick-Sloan Plan, which aimed to provide postwar employment by authorizing the Army Corps of

Engineers to construct five earthen-rolled hydroelectric dams on the Missouri River. To make way for the dams, an entire river ecosystem was destroyed, and more than a thousand Native families were removed. In the Fort Berthold reservation, four-fifths of the tribe was removed, and 94 percent of their agricultural lands were flooded. In Lakota and Dakota communities, 75 percent of the indigenous plant and wildlife was destroyed; 90 percent of commercial timber was lost; and one-third of the reservation-based populations were removed — all for hydroelectric power for far-off cities, irrigation for settler farmers, and flood control for downriver states. It was a convergence of the military-industrial complex, a recolonization of Native lands and waters by a branch of the military through near-wartime levels of economic and political mobilization.

But Pick-Sloan didn't happen in a vacuum; it was part of a broader national energy infrastructure development plan. In the 1930s, the Bonneville, John Day, and Dalles dams on the Columbia River flooded Nez Perce, Umatilla, Yakama, and Warm Springs tribes. In 1965, the Kinzua Dam in New York forcibly dislocated more than 600 Senecas. And an "energy sacrifice zone," the Nixon-era term coined by the National Academy of Sciences, described the Shoshone and Paiute lands taken for nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site, a 1,360-square-mile "reservation" that was bombed 928 times — nearly half the world's nuclear explosions. The spirit of these times frequently gets forgotten: freedom for some is unfreedom for others.

# Decolonization

Why is it easier for some to imagine the end of fossil fuels but not settler colonialism? To imagine green economies and carbon-free, wind turbine, solar power, and electric bullet train utopias but not the return of Indigenous lands? It's

not an either/or scenario. Both are possible — and necessary.

The question of restoring Indigenous land to Indigenous people is thoroughly political, which means the theft of it was — and is — not inevitable or beyond our current capacities to resolve. The same goes for reparations, ending the hardening of the US border, US imperialism, and the continued exploitation of resources and labor in the Global South by countries in the North. "The issue is that accumulation-based societies don't like the answers we come up with because they are not quick technological fixes, they are not easy," Anishnaabeg intellectual Leanne Betasamosake Simpson said in a recent interview.

Fifty years ago, decolonization — nations freeing themselves from colonial rule — and land reform inspired global visions for a socialist future, advancing the class struggle further than it has ever gone by raising the living standards of billions in the Global South. Some Western socialists seem to have abandoned that future in favor of mining asteroids. We need a revolution of values that re-centers relationships to one another and the earth over profits.

## The Red Deal

Some advocates of the GND propose implementing a 70 percent tax hike on the wealthiest. Others argue that seizing the assets of fossil fuel companies and reallocating money and resources away from state institutions directly contributing to climate change and social inequality must also be part of the agenda. Inspired by the appeals to divest from the financial institutions funding oil pipelines during the Standing Rock uprising and the Movement for Black Lives' divest-invest strategy, the Red Deal also targets the institutions of the military, police, and prisons for divestment. Imagine divesting from these institutions and

opening up $1 trillion to accomplish the task of saving this earth for everyone.

Last December, White Earth activist Winona LaDuke pushed for an Indigenous-led GND. The former Green Party vice presidential candidate inspired us to think about how divesting from fossil-fuel infrastructure — such as billion-dollar oil pipelines — could be reinvested into building wind and solar farms and sustainable agriculture reservations. The most radical appraisals of the GND come from Indigenous people. According to the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), the GND, as is, "will leave incentives by industries and governments to continue causing harms to Indigenous communities." Before endorsing, IEN calls for a clear commitment to keep fossil fuels in the ground; rejecting carbon pricing schemes; strengthening the language on Indigenous peoples; and stopping, not prolonging, our current exploitative and abusive economic and political systems.

A complete moratorium on *all* new fossil fuel extraction — a long-standing demand by Indigenous environmental organizations to "keep it in the ground" —would cause a ruling-class rebellion. The recent slurry of anti-protest laws from state to state suggests it already has. This is familiar: Indigenous peoples pose a radical threat to the fossil-fuel industry — at the site of extraction and transportation — yet their demands seem to be marginalized within the mainstream environmental movement.

# Abolition

Prison abolition and an end to border imperialism are key aspects of the Red Deal, for good reason. The GND calls for the creation of millions of "green" jobs. In the United States today, however, about 70 million people — nearly one-third of adults — have some kind of criminal conviction, whether or not they've served

time, that prevents them from holding certain kinds of jobs. If we add this number of people to the approximately 8 million undocumented migrants, the sum is about half the US workforce, two-thirds of whom are not white. *Half* of the workforce faces employment discrimination because of mass criminalization and incarceration.

The terrorization of black, Indigenous, Latino, migrant, and poor communities by border enforcement agencies and the police drives down wages and disciplines poor people, whether or not they are working, by keeping them in a state of perpetual uncertainty and precariousness. As extreme weather and imperialist interventions continue to fuel migration, especially from Central America, the policies of punishment — such as walls, detention camps, and increased border security — continue to feed capital with cheap, throwaway lives. The question of citizenship — what right does a colonizing settler nation have to say who does and doesn't belong? — is something that will have to be thoroughly challenged as a "legal" privilege to life chances. Equitable access to employment and social care must break down imperial borders, not reproduce them.

## Demilitarization

The only reference to national security in the current GND calls climate change "a threat multiplier." The Pentagon used the same language in a 2015 congressional report detailing how all strategic commands are, as a matter of necessity, integrating climate change into their global counterinsurgency operations. The Intelligence Community's 2019 "Worldwide Threat Assessment" warns environmental degradation and climate change "are likely to fuel competition for resources, economic distress, and social discontent" in the present and near future by "threatening infrastructure, health, and water and food security."

And, according to a June 2019 intelligence briefing that Trump tried to suppress, the State Department cautions that, because of climate change, "local problems" in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Southeast Asia make these regions especially vulnerable for unrest that "could spill over with global consequences." The goal, then, is containment. The "threat multiplier" is 22 million potential climate refugees. The military — which has long produced reports about climate impacts — is already "going green" by focusing on national security, which means protecting the welfare of wealthy countries (specifically US citizens) and their economic interests while portraying those in poor countries, who suffer the worst effects of warming temperatures, as security threats.

The militarization of first-world "humanitarianism" has to end. Internationalism, the making of just and peaceful relations with the nations of this world, must be based on solidarity that transcends borders and decenters the imperial core. The Green Party's 2012 version of the GND platform envisioned cutting the bloated US military budget in half — which would still make US military spending the highest in the world and nearly twice as much as China's. The US military, with nearly 800 bases worldwide in more than seventy countries and territories, plays no positive role in the world, even at half its capacity. The US militarization of the globe has to end. We can start by defunding the US military and reallocating its resources to the parts of the world and the people the United States has destroyed, destabilized, or dispossessed.

## A Caretaking Economy

A new, green economy — one that will be, if Indigenous peoples have anything to say about it, a "caretaking economy" — is the antithesis to a militarized extractive economy, what we Lakotas call "owasicu owe," the fat-taker, the colonizer, the

capitalist economy; or what White Earth activist Winona LaDuke calls the "Weitiko" — a cannibal economy. If prisons, police, and the military are the caretakers of violence, then educators, health-care workers, counselors, Water Protectors, and Land Defenders are caretakers of human and non-human relations. Compare the pay gaps between carceral and military workers (mostly men) to that of care workers (mostly women), and you'll see the values of this current society.

This caretaking economy is already in place. Three-quarters of land-based environments and two-thirds of marine environments have been affected by capitalist development, but environmental degradation has been less severe in places managed by Indigenous peoples and local communities, a UN report recently found. While making up only 5 percent of the world's population, Indigenous peoples also protect 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity. Indigenous peoples and local communities who have distinct cultural and social ties to ancestral homelands and bioregions still caretake at least a quarter of the world's land area. This includes places that are the lungs of the world, such as the Amazon rainforest, and its veins, like the Missouri River Basin — areas facing existential threats of deforestation, damming, water contamination, oil and gas development, and mining. Indigenous people protect the land, air, and water we all need to live. This is why Indigenous environmental activists are so severely criminalized and targeted for assassination in response to our organizing throughout the world — we are always in the way.

In the United States, Indigenous caretakers have been the most confrontational arm of the environmental movement by blocking the construction of oil pipelines. The flurry of new federal and state laws specifically targets this tactic. Following the Standing Rock protests, eight states have passed American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)–inspired "critical infrastructure" laws criminalizing the protesting of oil pipelines. New legislation proposed by Trump would make "inhibiting the operation" of an oil pipeline, such as simply standing in the way of construction, an offense punishable with twenty years in prison.

South Dakota's "Next Generation Model" legislation, which was drafted by Republican governor Kristi Noem in collaboration with the Keystone XL parent company TC Energy, goes beyond the ALEC model. It creates new civil penalties for "riot boosting," which include anyone who "directs, advises, encourages, or solicits other persons participating in the riot." The goal is simple: chill resistance by criminalizing Lakota Water Protectors fighting an oil pipeline trespassing through their treaty territory.

The decriminalization of Indigenous caretakers is a fundamental priority, if we're going to have a chance at defeating the fossil-fuel industry and preserving what keeps us alive, the earth itself.

## Land Restoration

The best forms of environmental policy come from the bottom up. In North America, it begins with the land, a major source of wealth and inequality. As Dina Gilio-Whitaker from the Colville Confederated Tribes argues in her book *As Long as the Grass Grows*, settler state conservation policies stem from "protecting" slivers of nature by killing and removing Indigenous peoples from the land to create nature reserves, national and state parks, and "public lands." Under Trump's administration, millions of acres of this land have been opened for oil and gas extraction, threatening Indigenous sacred sites and surrounding communities.

But private landownership has been equally devastating. The Homestead Act of 1862 carved up 270 million acres of Indigenous territory for white settlers. The invaders pulverized buffalo skulls into fertilizer for their plots — the sacred animals slaughtered by the millions to near extinction to starve Indigenous peoples off the land. Once cleared and settled, homesteading produced wealth for

generations of white settlers, while black, Native, and non-white people were categorically excluded. Where there weren't crops, industrial feedlots and grazing pastures for cattle replaced open-range buffalo herds. Large-scale industrial farming raises ethical questions not about how these animals die but about how they live, and how customary agriculture and indigenous animals are sacrificed for meat and dairy consumption.

Today, white settlers own 96 percent of all agricultural lands and 98 percent of privately owned land in the United States.

In 1970, Vine Deloria Jr candidly spelled out the problem, and even suggested a solution to North American settlers. "It just seems to a lot of Indians that this continent was a lot better off when we were running it," he wrote in the *New York Times*. Perhaps liberal-minded readers of that era thought it was clever word play, the posturing of a Red Power militant — attention-grabbing sloganeering, but not a serious political demand. To the original people of this land, it was truth and prophecy: no society can ever have an ethical relationship to a place it stole. And today, Deloria's words sound more like rational environmental policy when compared to what's been on offer: a "drive it like you stole it" mentality or, more accurately, a "live on it like you stole it" attitude.

Under current US laws, Indigenous sovereignty provides limited recourse. Tribes themselves represent a third sovereignty next to states and federal authority. The imperialist foundation of federal Indian law, however, severely limits the exercise of self-government. Racist and colonial legal doctrines — such as doctrine of discovery, the domestic dependent nation status, and plenary power — and oversight by the Bureau of Indian Affairs reveal that Indigenous-US relations are colonial to the core and centered on the acquisition of the land. The successive stages of Indian policy — allotment, citizenship, tribal enrollment, termination, and "self-determination" (our current era) — have also, in various ways, presented colonial domination as a form of empowerment, to enable Indigenous consent for their own dispossession. In the 1970s, for example, the Nixon administration

reversed the trend of terminating the federal status and introduced a new direction of "Indian self-determination." Despite the name change, Indigenous peoples and lands today, however, are no more "self-determined," but remain under federal control. The complexities of Indian law and policy are due for a complete overhaul and the abandonment of colonial principles. In other words, it would require the reestablishment of Indigenous laws and governance.

## An Indian Problem?

This isn't *just* an Indian problem. If every struggle were made into a climate struggle, then every struggle in North America must be made into a struggle for decolonization. The solutions offered in the Red Deal must entail a social revolution that turns back the forces of destruction. It must penetrate the economic and cultural realms with equal urgency and force. Indigenous peoples should be empowered to develop and implement restorative practices according to their own customs and traditions. This is the vision of the Red Deal, uniting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in common struggle.

The energies and passions of Indigenous peoples at the forefront of resisting extractive capitalism should inspire everyone, as the Water Protectors inspired a generation of climate justice revolutionaries. But Indigenous demands for the restoration of land, air, and water are not only a signal for the return of land, but also the return of justice. Until then, it is all talk.

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