



“The House Is on Fire, and So Are We”

The Global Youth Climate Strike in NYC



A young activist in NYC
Credit: Jane Paul

BY JANE PAUL

Over seven million people gathered in 180 countries around the world on Friday, September 20th to take part in a Global Youth Climate Strike, demanding urgent action to address the climate crisis. I joined tens of thousands of people of all ages in the downtown streets of New York City to participate in this global day of action. I’ve seen my share of protests—from the first Earth Day to standing for immigrants’ rights just a few weeks ago. But the combined urgency of the climate crisis and the vibrancy of youth-led activism has created a uniquely compelling movement, that clearly calls out the failings of capitalism and prioritizes the vocal inclusion of frontline and indigenous communities that are disproportionately impacted by climate change.

When we gather at these actions, we don’t expect to see policy changes or political shifts overnight. However, what we do expect is to broadcast a message, and to fortify ourselves for the next day and the next, so we can weather the storms of injustice by convening with our compatriots and building the long-term power necessary to make change. These climate demonstrations are both hopeful and heartbreaking, as young people and activists create a stronger and more unified movement than ever before, but with the tragic chant of “give us back our future.”

Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish climate activist who helped to galvanize the international mobilization, has made capitalism’s role in the current crisis resoundingly clear. As Thunberg stated in her speech to the United Nations Climate Action Summit earlier this month, “the fairy tales of eternal economic growth” have fueled grossly inequitable economic distribution worldwide. The most developed nation’s methods of corporate funding, along with the financial system as a whole, have wreaked havoc on our weather, decimated our ecological balance, and built a global financial house of cards based on consumption, profiteering, and competition.

Examples of the dominant system’s inability to address the current crisis continue to mount. Hurricane Maria’s destruction of Puerto Rico in 2018 and last month’s Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas are just the most recent in a spate of catastrophic weather patterns and criminal neglect in the dearth of recovery assistance. In the aftermath of these disasters, both state aid and state compassion are absent, and as such, people step in to care for each other. Community cooperation and collaboration are evident, and show how we can share and manage our resources in crises, and in the commons, without rivalry or exclusion. When solidarity and interdependent economic practices are exercised, it becomes more apparent that by prioritizing caring for shared resources, the Earth, and each other, we can create a new economy that is deeply connected to climate protection.

The Green New Deal is the legislative embodiment of many elements of this vision. To be clear, the Green New Deal does not attempt to dismantle markets, but it reforms them in such a way that changes how goods and services and well-being are valued. The Green New Deal advocates for widely distributed, community-owned renewable energy,

high-speed and affordable rail systems, job transitions away from the fossil fuel empire, retrofitting buildings for energy efficiency and water conservation, planting billions of trees, rehabilitating wetlands, and renewing soil—programs and projects designed by local multicultural, multigenerational communities. Benefits will include dignified family-supporting jobs, improved public education, care-giving options, and far-reaching healthcare. The financial structure for a robust enactment of the Green New Deal will also require significant shifts in cultural and societal approaches to wealth distribution.

To stop the crisis in its tracks is not probable—but to mitigate the damage, rescue ourselves from the edge of disaster, and repair communities—that can be done. If we look to the original Latin meaning of economy (*oeconomiaie*), it means management of home. Our home is in trouble. We need new structures and ways of thinking, as well as a shift in power, to replace our current destructive, exploitative, and competitive system with a regenerative people’s system. The global actions of September 20th emphasize that the time is now to passionately invest and believe in systemic economic change, to strengthen our home, and to build community wealth instead of corporate power. As the young protesters say: “The house is on fire, and so are we.” **D&S**

JANE PAUL is a teacher, writer, and community activist. She teaches urban studies, alternative economies, and urban sustainability at Antioch University Los Angeles.

SOURCES: Globalclimatestrike.net; Emily Chasan and David Wainer, “Teen Activist Greta Thunberg to World Leaders: ‘How Dare You!’,” Bloomberg, Sept. 23, 2019; Jeffrey Ball, “Why Carbon Pricing Isn’t Working,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018; COWS, University of Wisconsin-Madison (cows.org); Blue Green Alliance (bluegreenalliance.org); Source Watch, “Apollo Alliance” (sourcewatch.org).