

Global Issues

For a Red-and-Green Alliance in Europe

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Among the more encouraging developments of the last twelve months has been the renewed interest in the “Green New Deal”, at first among leftists in the United States (US), especially recently elected Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez,² but also, in reaction to this, in Europe. The idea had already been discussed in the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany over ten years ago (Green New Deal Group, 2008; Giegold and Bütikofer, 2009), but seemed to have been dropped due to a lack of resonance, or because some early protagonists changed their minds. The very term “Green New Deal” harkens back to what is sometimes called capitalism’s Golden Age – that is, to an age of Keynesian class compromise that was arguably better for large sections of the working class, although not for its more marginal segments, like female or migrant workers. At the same time, it promises to address the challenges of the present, namely the climate and environmental crises as well as the social crisis of increasing inequality and precariousness.

The Green New Deal is not the only expression of a growing realisation that the climate crisis cannot be solved without taking into account the social impact of the necessary measures. In Europe, an important catalyst for this conclusion was the French “yellow vests” movement, a short-lived and politically ambivalent, but energetic, popular movement against growing socio-economic insecurity that was triggered by a planned rise in fuel taxes. It has given a boost to discussions about a “just transition”.

Around the same time as the yellow vests, another movement began in Europe that has shifted the political coordinates: the “School Strikes for Climate” by pupils. Their single demand is that governments take effective action to combat catastrophic climate change. In summer 2018, sixteen-year-old Swede Greta Thunberg decided to skip school to sit in front of the Swedish parliament building with a hand-made sign with the words *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (School Strike for Climate) until such time as the government takes action to bring Sweden in line with the goals of the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. Her example quickly inspired regular school strikes in a number of European countries, notably Belgium and Germany, but also outside Europe. These ongoing protests have shaken up the established political parties and are arguably a factor behind the strong performance of Green parties at the elections for the European Parliament in May 2019.

However, there are also less-encouraging developments. First, there seems to be a growing distance, even distrust, between some of the activists and political actors that are primarily focused on environmental goals, especially climate change, on the one hand, and those who base themselves in some way on the labour movement on the other. Examples of the former include the German Green party. The most successful of all the ecologist parties in Europe, and

¹ The author is writing in a strictly personal capacity. None of the following should be in any way taken as the stance of the European Parliament or any of the political parties represented in it.

² Ocasio-Cortez submitted a motion for a Green New Deal to the US House of Representatives, though, unsurprisingly, without success (<https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/gnd>; accessed 22 July 2019).

probably the entire world, it used to be firmly rooted in a left-wing world view and regularly opted for alliances with the centre-left Social Democrats and/or Germany's left-wing party. In recent years, however, it has opened itself up much more to the centre-right and the parties of the traditional bourgeoisie. The most important example of this trend is found in the south-western state of Baden Württemberg, the first ever state in the Federal Republic of Germany to have a Green prime minister. After governing together with the Social Democrats from 2011 until 2016, the Greens entered into a coalition with the centre-right Christian Democrats. Rather than a marriage of convenience dictated by election results, it shows signs of being a genuine match, as evidenced in the cosy relationship between the Green prime minister of Baden Württemberg and the automotive industry, which is traditionally strong in this state.³ Moreover, following the German Greens' strong election results in recent state-level elections, and most recently in the elections for the European Parliament in which they came second, they are headed for a coalition with the centre-right and the free-market liberal party after the 2021 federal elections – something that would have incensed the party base not too long ago, but is seen as normal now.

Then there is the battle over the future of coal. Energy generation from coal or lignite produces high levels of emissions and is rightly in the cross-hairs of European climate activists. They demand an end to coal and lignite in the very short term to achieve the world's climate goals as set out in the Paris Climate Accord. However, this pits them against workers, trade unions and entire regions who are understandably afraid about job losses and socio-economic decline.

There is thus a risk of a permanent disconnect between the red and the green, even though none of the actors involved may actively work towards that. Such a disconnect corresponds to realistic strategic options. It is entirely possible to create social and political alliances that foreground either redistribution and jobs or, alternatively, the fight against climate change and other forms of environmental degradation. Such alliances seem easier to forge than one that tries to unite both in a coherent project. However, as I will argue here, focusing on either the red or the green comes at a high risk of achieving neither. Progressives should choose the more difficult route of bringing the two together.

The following thoughts about the compatibility of “red” and “green” policies and the social alliances underpinning the different strategic options necessarily use a very broad brush. They describe tendencies that are certainly real, but far from uniform across countries and continents. They are to varying degrees characteristic of highly developed capitalist countries in north-western Europe and North America. Other parts of the world have rather different dynamics.

Socio-economic Discontent among Popular Classes as a Threat to Socially Imbalanced Environmentalism

What lessons does the French yellow vest movement hold for a red-and-green politics? In a nutshell, it has demonstrated what can happen when eco-taxes on consumption hit economically struggling sections of a population. This highly decentralised protest movement emerged late in 2018 and lasted less than half a year. During this time, however, it managed to organise

³ On the intellectual side, this tendency is represented by Ralf Fücks who has been promoting a green market economy and has referred to himself as a “green ordo-liberal” – ordo-liberalism being a kind of domestic German equivalent to the neo-liberal views that dominate the Anglo-American world (Poschardt, 2013).

numerous, occasionally militant protests in the capital, Paris, as well as in many other places all around the country. In fact, the movement has strong roots outside of Paris, France's undisputed centre for everything. One of its most popular tactics was to blockade traffic roundabouts to draw attention to itself and its demands. Copy-cat initiatives quickly emerged in other European countries, but never reached significant size or power, with the possible exception of Belgium. The movement was triggered by a government plan to raise the taxes on fuel for cars as a means of financing and implementing an energy transition, but it was driven by a broad, albeit diffuse, socio-economic discontent. As a consequence of the yellow vests' determined protests, the French government scrapped the planned increase of the fuel tax for 2019 and announced further measures to reduce the tax burden for people on low incomes.

Politically, the yellow vests were hard to pin down, especially along the traditional left–right spectrum. According to a survey by the sociological research group *Quantité Critique* among activists and sympathisers of the yellow vest movement, 51 per cent declared themselves to be neither left nor right, while another 19 per cent refused to answer the question. Of the remaining 30 per cent, about half considered themselves left-wing or very left-wing, 11.6 per cent right-wing or very right-wing, and the remainder stood in the middle. When asked whom they had supported in the French 2017 presidential elections, none of the candidates that had been available, nor any of the political camps more broadly speaking, emerged as a clear frontrunner. However, it is interesting that the two who garnered most votes from among the surveyed yellow vests were the radical right candidate Marine Le Pen (19 per cent) and the left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon (18.4 per cent) (*Quantité Critique*, 2018).

Despite the movement's lack of a clear political tendency, its demands appear to have a left-wing slant, although its decentralised nature makes it difficult to say what its "official" demands are.⁴ They partly reflect the fact that it originated as a movement against a specific tax rise, so demands for tax justice feature largely. These were later supplemented by demands for more direct democracy and for wealth redistribution through the government (Bendaly and Kabbaj, 2019: 9). About two-thirds of the yellow vests come from the popular classes composed of workers, non-senior employees and small business owners or craftsmen. Over 60 per cent claim that they regularly experience financial difficulties at the end of each month (Bendaly and Kabbaj, 2019: 3). Considering the politically diffuse, albeit generally redistributive, nature of the movement and its demands, the absence of organisation or recognised leaders, and its social composition, it seems fair to characterise the yellow vest movement as one of the popular tax revolts, of which history knows many.

The movement and its success in defeating the fuel tax increase demonstrate what can happen when socially unbalanced environmentalism meets increasing social inequality. Any transition to a low-carbon and ecologically sustainable economy entails considerable burdens of adjustment in terms of job losses in certain industries like fossil fuel extraction, increases in public expenditure, devaluation of privately owned investments in industries made unviable by environmental regulation (so-called stranded assets), and higher costs for certain goods and services for consumers, especially those with a high carbon footprint, such as air travel. As a tendency, the more unequal a society is, the more difficult it will be for that society to distribute

⁴ See also "Gilets Jaunes: A Pioneering Study of the 'Low Earners' Revolt", *Verso Blog* (14 December 2018), available at www.versobooks.com/blogs/4180-gilets-jaunes-a-pioneering-study-of-the-low-earners-revolt (accessed 6 September 2019); originally published as "Gilets jaunes: une enquête pionnière sur la 'révolte des revenus modestes'", *Le Monde* (11 December 2018), available at www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/11/gilets-jaunes-une-enquete-pionniere-sur-la-revolte-des-revenus-modestes_5395562_3232.html (accessed 6 September 2019).

these burdens in politically acceptable fashion (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 215–228, 2014).⁵ More egalitarian societies can reach agreement more easily because of a stronger sense that everybody will have to shoulder their fair share of the burden and that no one will be left behind by the transition. Once above a certain threshold of material wealth, individuals are no longer interested primarily in their absolute level of wealth, but more in their social position relative to their peers as well as their perspectives for the future. This implies that, in the highly developed countries, there would even be some scope for wealth losses in absolute terms for a considerable part of the population. On the other hand, in highly unequal societies struggles over who bears the burden of adjustment will be fiercer because each group will fear being put at a disadvantage. Those whose socio-economic position is already precarious would suffer particularly, be it because of job losses, the decline of entire regions, or because they are disproportionately affected by taxes on consumption that make sense from an environmental perspective but that, like all consumption taxes, are regressive. The yellow vests are a case in point. Having been squeezed financially for a while as a result of changes to the welfare state and more regressive taxation, they had finally had enough when the planned fuel tax threatened to further deteriorate their already precarious socio-economic situation (Özpinar, 2019).

Interestingly, however, although the yellow vest movement was triggered by the introduction of a fuel tax that was explicitly intended by President Macron as a means of financing and implementing an energy transition, it appears that its activists and sympathisers are not hostile to environmental concerns and that many of them, in fact, share those concerns (Bendali and Kabbaj, 2019: 7). That suggests that a political space exists for the introduction of environmental measures, perhaps even those that affect individual consumption, provided that overall tax justice is assured and that the trend towards widening inequalities is halted or reversed. The yellow vests are *not* the enemy of the student climate protesters!

The yellow vests were a classic street protest movement, but discontent can also be expressed at the ballot box. In various countries, working-class voters have recently lent their support to politicians or parties of the very far right. In Germany, for instance, the far-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*) has been described as the new workers' party because of its support from working-class voters, especially trade unionists (Dörre, 2018; Manow, 2018: 96–99).⁶ For France, Eribon (2016) has described how many working-class people have turned to the party of Marine Le Pen.⁷ With the possible exception of miners, these shifts are not directly

⁵ The relation between different levels of inequality and the capacity of arriving at a mutually agreeable distribution of the burden of adaptation may not be quite so straightforward. Different societies tolerate – in the sense of an absence of major political protest and upheaval – different absolute levels of social inequality. It may be the *trend* towards increasing or decreasing inequality that plays a role. France is probably still a comparatively equal society, but the recent tendency was for inequality to increase. Conversely, societies with an absolutely higher level of inequality might also be able to come to a burden-sharing agreement, provided that the trend is towards a decrease in inequality.

⁶ According to figures published by the German trade union federation Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), 13.1 per cent of union members who voted in the May 2019 European election voted for the AfD, compared to 11.0 per cent of all German voters (<https://www.dgb.de/++co++dd681d04-806e-11e9-aa1d-52540088cada>; accessed 25 July 2019).

⁷ Should Donald Trump be included as another example of a working-class shift to the right? After the 2016 US presidential election, many argued that Trump won because of mass defections of (white) workers from the Democratic Party. These claims appear overblown because Trump's main support base, at least during the primaries, consisted of above-average-earning and above-average-educated people (Manza and Crowley, 2017). That said, it seems that a certain part of the working-class vote did go to Trump, notably in states with a high concentration of manufacturing industries. While small in absolute

connected to environmental issues, but they are manifestations of a growing alienation between the working class and the left. Moreover, as a rule, these far-right parties and politicians are either clearly against effective climate protection measures and/or the Paris Accord, or at least ambivalent about them (Waldholz, 2019). Defections to the political right by sections of the working class could, therefore, have the more or less unintended consequence of sabotaging effective climate protection. Donald Trump, who announced in 2017 that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord at the earliest possible moment, has demonstrated this.

The Strategic Options for the Left: Between Red and Green

In this situation, characterised by an increasingly urgent environmental crisis and increasing discontent over rising inequality, what are the strategic options for the left? At the risk of gross over-simplification, and based on the assumption that the two main challenges for progressive politics are effective climate protection and the redistribution of income and wealth, but that these are not necessarily and inherently connected, we can distinguish three options, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Options for progressive politics

Redistribution Choice	Climate Protection	
	Yes	No
Yes	Popular (or cross-class) red-and-green alliance	Traditional working-class bloc
No	Green–bourgeois bloc	**

***I disregard this option because it would not be progressive.*

These options present different risks and opportunities, and correspond to different possible alliances, both at the level of party politics and the level of social classes. They may appear mechanically derived by cross-tabulating two binary options, but, as I have argued in the introduction, they correspond to political projects suggested or articulated by real people on the left.

One risk factor to take into account is which actors and social classes are most likely to oppose ambitious climate protection policies. One advantage that the “green–bourgeois” option has over the “red-and-green alliance” option is that it would not have to deal with the thorny political issue of how to compensate coal-mining regions, and possibly auto-industry regions, for the consequences of shutting them down or reducing them considerably. However, it would be confronted with two serious problems. First, since it relies on an alliance between the new green and highly educated urban bourgeoisie on the one hand and the traditional moneyed bourgeoisie on the other, the green–bourgeois alliance would have to consider the economic interests of the traditional bourgeoisie. These interests will be a formidable obstacle to effective climate

numbers, these defections seem to have been crucial in securing Trump’s overall victory (Brownstein, 2016).

protection. This is not because capitalists would simply block all such measures, but because they would water them down to the point that they become ineffective, or not as effective as they would have to be to achieve the rapid transition that is necessary to keep global warming to a tolerable level. Even relatively non-threatening market-based approaches like the sustainable business agenda are met with determined and frequently successful resistance from business lobbyists and the parties that sympathise with them. In more structural terms: effective climate protection measures in the context of a green–bourgeois scenario would clash with capital in general because, save for a few industries like solar panel producers, business will see these measures as excessively burdensome.

The second problem has already been mentioned. Parts of the working and middle classes, especially those who fear a loss of social status or are already feeling the effects of precarious work, may defect to the right and vote people into political power who are not committed to environmental protection because they believe that these people will listen to their concerns. Or, as in the case of the yellow vests, grass-roots movements of the economically disadvantaged may derail environmental policies that put the burden disproportionately on them, as in the case of carbon taxes for consumer goods and services. The motives of voters or protesters may be primarily economic, but they would also pose a risk to the success of environmental policies. Consumption taxes that are environmentally useful, but inevitably regressive, are an instrument that a green–bourgeois alliance would probably use extensively because they would not reduce the profits on capital, nor make a significant dent in the bourgeoisie’s wealth. In short, in the green–bourgeois alliance scenario, the risk is that working-class people and others in precarious socio-economic conditions would derail the alliance’s environmental policies, which would be unambitious anyway, either directly or through the ballot box.

Effective climate protection measures in the “red-and-green” alliance scenario would lead to a clash with workers in highly polluting industries, but not with the working class in general. It would, however, lead to fierce battle with business interests in general, save perhaps for a few industries that would stand to gain so much from an ecological transformation that vastly increased revenues would compensate them for higher taxes and wages. The following section looks at this scenario in a little more depth.

Table 2 summarises the main points so far and tries to flesh out the risks and opportunities for each of the three strategic options, especially the “traditional working-class bloc” scenario, which will not be discussed separately. It also identifies the alliances that could support each option, both in terms of alliances of social groups and party-political alliances.

Table 2. Consequences of the left’s strategic options between the red and the green

	Popular (cross-class) red-and-green alliance	Green–bourgeois bloc	Traditional working-class bloc
Possible alliance	Attempt to recreate historic popular alliance between people with low to average incomes who are at risk of a loss of social status and progressive urban milieu. At party-political level, this would amount to “red-red-green” coalitions of social democrats, left-wing parties and greens, and, in some countries, possibly liberal parties, such as the Dutch D66. ⁸	Green bourgeoisie, i.e. educated urban middle class, together with the more progressive sections of the traditional bourgeoisie and “green” branches of industry. At party-political level, this alliance could be represented by coalitions that involve the green and liberal parties and either a very centrist centre–left or a moderate centre–right party.	Targets the working class, especially its male part, and sections of the lower middle class, especially those who are at risk of losing social status. At the party-political level this would be reflected in alliances between centre–left and more radical left-wing parties, or, in countries like the UK, a reinvigorated Labour Party under left-wing leadership.
Opportunities	A broad-based progressive project for socio-economic transformation offers the best chances for effective climate protection because the burdens of adjustments can be distributed in more consensual fashion.	In some European countries, such as Germany, this seems currently the most likely and easily achieved alliance because many green voters have themselves become relatively bourgeois in terms of class habitus, and because the parties of the new, green and the traditional bourgeoisie have also become closer lately. It offers the best chance to achieve moderate climate-related goals in the medium term.	Easy to demarcate political friends and foe, and thus amenable to populist/popular politics (Nölke, 2017; Mouffe, 2018), which facilitates campaigning and mobilisation. Likely to be most effective in regaining some working-class and protest voters who have turned to the right.
Risks	Relatively difficult to come up with clear messages and to mobilise because of considerable socio-cultural cleavages between the social groups that would have to support this option. Capital flight and tax resistance on the part of the rich and large corporations. Risk that the alliance will falter over conflict between environmental goals and securing jobs in highly polluting industries.	Would amount to giving up on the long-term perspective of creating a progressive social majority and a progressive project combining red and green objectives. Maintaining the green–bourgeois bloc would also mean curtailing the ambitiousness of climate protection. Severe risk that the bottom half of society is lost forever for progressive politics to radical right or even fascist political actors. In the best case, the green–bourgeois bloc would encounter stiff, but politically diffuse resistance like France’s yellow vests.	The somewhat retrograde and fairly narrow social base that would back this strategic option means that it would struggle to attain a social and party-political majority. High risk that progressive urban social milieu will be driven into the arms of the traditional bourgeoisie. High risk of being ineffective in socio-economic and environmental terms. Risk of capital flight.

Prospects for a Red-and-Green Alliance

How likely is the creation of a cross-class red-and-green alliance? It is in some ways the most difficult because the classes and social groups to be brought together are far apart in terms of their life worlds, and there is a chance that they would clash over certain progressive values like openness towards migration, LGBT rights and so on – those that have been called, somewhat misleadingly, “identity politics”. Moreover, inasmuch as such an alliance amounts to an attempt to

⁸ In first-past-the-post or majoritarian electoral systems, like that of the UK, the party-political representation of this particular societal alliance would have to be very different. It might require the traditional centre–left party to become more radical and acquire an environmentalist agenda.

make the bourgeoisie and business bear a large part of the burden of adjustment that comes with the transition to an ecologically sustainable economy, it would make very powerful enemies and face relentless media scaremongering about an impending “communist takeover” as well as a severe and concerted pushback by the affected social groups, including threats of and actual capital flight. It might also have to deal with some measure of resistance from workers and unions in polluting industries, although the strength of that resistance is likely to diminish if credible assurances are put in place that they will not be left behind by the transformation.

On the other hand, the Green New Deal provides the cross-class red-and-green alliance with a narrative and a comprehensive, viable project that unites the two sides. Furthermore, despite the dominant tendency of estrangement between environmentalists and class warriors, there are also tentative developments in the opposite direction among, for example, European trade unions. Some German unions – such as the services workers’ union Ver.di, the metal workers’ union IG Metall, which is strong in the automotive sector, and the construction workers’ union IG BAU – have started to address ecological concerns and are now actively debating how to shape the transition to a low-carbon economy (Bergfeld, 2019). IG Metall even accepted a recent invitation for a high-level exchange of views from the School Strikes for Climate movement, and IG BAU encouraged its members to participate in a day of global climate strike action on 20 September 2019. British unions are also engaging more and more with environmental concerns (Farnhill, 2016), and the University and College Union (UCU) called for a thirty-minute solidarity stoppage in support of the global climate strike (UCU, 2019).

That said, these initiatives and discussions remain half-hearted or within a framework of ecological modernisation, and do not contemplate more radical steps, such as the overall reduction of consumption levels or a break with certain types of infrastructure or consumption norms, like the prevalence of individual auto-mobility (Brand, 2019). Too few are as committed to bringing together environmental protection and the struggle for better working and living conditions as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, which has in recent years systematically built up organisational capacities and internal knowledge about environmental concerns (Satgar, 2015). Perhaps unions should consider taking up again the old demand of a drastic reduction of working hours. Ultimately, they would have to rise above a corporatist defence of their members’ immediate economic interests and position themselves as actors of an environmental transition. Left-wing parties should support such moves and represent them in institutional politics.

As for the Greens, there is, on the one hand, the seemingly inexorable tendency to forge alliances with liberals and the centre-right. On the other hand, the discussions over the Green New Deal and just transitions have also very clearly struck a chord with them and given a boost to more left-leaning sections of the Greens. They should elevate this rhetoric to a strategic choice and draw the inevitable conclusion that alliances with the centre-right and (most) liberal parties are not compatible with this strategy. Where their activism puts them into conflict with workers in certain industries, environmentalists should also call for forms of social compensation when these industries are shut down or shrunk. Obviously, the traditional parties of the left also need to open themselves up more to environmental issues and, in particular, acknowledge the urgency of fighting climate change. Fortunately, there are positive signs, such as the fact that sections of the Democratic Party in the United States actively promote the Green New Deal and that there are similar initiatives in the UK Labour Party.

Mouffe (2018) argues that the current conjuncture is marked by the end of the hegemony of the neo-liberal project and the social forces associated with it, and therefore represents a moment of genuine political openness. That openness is currently exploited more effectively by the

political right, but if progressive forces play their cards right and build on the above-mentioned signs of rapprochement, it can also go the other way.

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