

Seize the Future

A bold, progressive climate agenda for 2024 and beyond

Winning durable change requires a policy platform that tackles the root causes of domestic economic insecurity and global instability. A record number of people can't afford their rent or their utilities, and can barely manage the rising cost of education, health care, food, and child care. Even with "high employment" numbers, workers struggle to make ends meet and pay off debt. People across party lines are outraged to witness their government backstop a genocide that has killed nearly 17,000 children. Climate disasters are creating cycles of destruction and disinvestment, further destabilizing US households. **This is the polycrisis.**

Centrists in the US and elsewhere have been avoiding hard decisions, instead providing stopgap measures to the interlocking problems of economic inequality, never ending war, racism, and environmental degradation. The Democratic Party has not only failed the working class, it has provided an opening for right-wing movements, who have fed off the injustices and inequalities of market-based solutions. The stronghold of neoliberal policy consensus that champions the free-market rule unraveling. We are living in what some have called "the age of consequences." To transcend these accelerating crises, we need bold and creative solutions that address the underlying drivers of chaos in working people's lives and of climate breakdown.

Progressive movements, labor unions, and allied politicians must offer a toolkit of climate policies that link kitchen table issues to structural changes in political economy and the compounding climate emergency. **This is how we win the future.**

We see four crucial issues for progressives to organize around in the leadup to November and beyond:

- 1) **tackling the cost of living crisis,**
- 2) **supplying good jobs and infrastructure,**
- 3) **ending forever wars, and**
- 4) **preventing disasters and protecting migrant safety.**

Recent federal legislation and executive actions have made headway in addressing these concerns. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) opened opportunities for progress on infrastructure repairs and the energy transition, though with important caveats. A more progressive National Labor Relations Board has defended worker rights to organize and bargain. There have been improvements in the speed of processing citizenship applications.

So much more remains to be done. IRA clean energy incentives have overwhelmingly benefited wealthy homeowners: households earning under \$50,000 account for just 7% of tax credit recipients. Biden's government has awarded over 1,400 new licenses for oil and gas projects, resulting in record levels of fossil fuel production and unprecedented profits for the industry. The green jobs being created with federal dollars are disproportionately in states where workers face obstacles to joining a union. Despite promises for a ceasefire, Israel continues to commit a genocide in Gaza—with US-made bombs. Migrants crossing the border continue to face inhumane detention and severely limited opportunities for asylum. And for households across the nation, the rent is too high, utility bills too expensive, transportation costly and inaccessible, and vulnerability to extreme temperatures and climate disasters is deepening.

We offer a set of solutions to four key issues that we believe both dominate the current political context and intersect directly with the climate crisis. We draw on the existing ecosystem of progressive policy expertise, guided by a theory of change that builds mass, cross-class, multiracial movements and appeals to broadly popular demands –and connects the dots between domestic and international crises. We propose expanding the public sector to provide essential services and usher through a rapid and just energy transition; empowering workers to organize and gain material benefits from the boom in green industry; embracing global cooperation over geopolitical escalation, and migrant rights rather than hardened borders; and protecting everyone, especially the most vulnerable, from the ravages of the climate crisis.

Tacking the Cost of Living Crisis

Problem

Economic insecurity has been exacerbated as the climate emergency has intensified. Wages have not kept pace with inflation, so workers are squeezed by astronomically high rent and utility bills, unable to afford childcare, and drowning in medical and educational debt. This cost of living crisis is profoundly unequal: rising prices for basic goods and services represent a bigger proportion of working class people's spending than high income households. Neoliberal austerity has starved public services and disinvested in necessary institutions, from schools to utilities.

Solution

Strengthening the social safety net and investing in communities is more important than ever as we navigate the impacts of the climate crisis and support families and workers in the transition to a greener economy. Progressive climate policy must take on the cost-of-living crisis by guaranteeing essential public services, investing in the care economy, and ensuring housing stability for all—while transitioning these systems off of fossil fuels and building worker power.

- **Ensure housing stability for all:** The next President should solidify recent proposals for rent caps by using executive authority to implement an annual rent cap of 3% as a condition for using federal loans and eliminating junk fees in the rental market; this would immediately address a core driver of runaway living costs for families. The federal government must also support expanding the supply of healthy, green, affordable homes by building and preserving millions of new units of green social housing and creating a national Whole Home Repairs program. We need a national Tenants Bill of Rights to ensure tenants have habitable and climate resilient homes—and the freedom to organize for better housing conditions, including repairs to lower utility bills.
- **Invest in essential, zero emissions public services:** A progressive climate platform should push further for measures that decrease the large, regressive spending portions of working class paychecks on costs like transit and utility bills. While the IRA focused on personal electric vehicles deployment that have benefited richer households more, it failed to truly democratize mobility Federal funding for emission-free mass transit will be critical to lowering, or even eliminating, the cost of transportation, and giving poor and working people better access to jobs, leisure, and basic needs like health care and groceries. Families deserve a permanent ban on shutoffs and utility debt relief for water, energy, and internet—in other words, utility justice. It also requires ensuring that utilities stay low-cost and high quality (eg. keeping drinking water clean and homes warm) by dramatically increasing the capacity of programs like LIHEAP and federal weatherization funding.

- **Treat care work with dignity:** Care workers are frontline workers in the climate crisis – from hospital workers receiving victims of heat waves to home care workers evacuating their patients in flooding to teachers caring for students in heat waves. Without a dignified, unionized care workforce, we cannot meet society’s needs and ensure that all people can receive the lifelong care they deserve. School investment should be a cornerstone of the next President’s care agenda. Underinvestment has left many school buildings decrepit and even dangerous. We need investments in healthy, green, modern, decarbonized public schools that keep students and school workers healthy 365 days a year, provide spaces of refuge for communities through extreme weather, and prepare students and communities alike for the realities of a warming world.

Supplying Good Jobs & Infrastructure

Problem

Zero-emissions energy, transportation, and buildings are all technically feasible — but these systems are not being built at the speed or scale we need to avert climate chaos. Instead, private developers and contractors are in the driver’s seat, which makes urgent investment and job security vulnerable to the whims of financial markets, and increases the risks of false solutions such as power sector carbon capture and fossil gas-based hydrogen. Privatized asset ownership of critical infrastructure, the financialization of climate action that sends huge volumes of public money to financial intermediaries, and the vacuum of public coordination are hobbling the transition we need. We do have to build faster—but we have to build in the right way to achieve positive, popular, and enduring results.

Solution

Strong public institutions to directly invest in and manage an energy transition – tackling the US’s damaging transmission grid bottleneck, rapidly and justly scaling up green generation, making intentional use of public power and planning, and building out globally just supply chains and unionized green jobs. Public investments for decarbonization should be wielded to carefully manage the transition away from fossil fuels and build the infrastructure for a green, inclusive society where everyone benefits from the remaking of our energy systems.

- **Empower the green working class:** At this time of unprecedented economic shifts, the next President must play a central role in transitioning workers to good, green jobs. We need to build on the momentum of the American Climate Corps, and provide a jobs guarantee for workers in carbon intensive industries with training and transitional programs tied to new employment opportunities with the federal government as the employer of last resort. While the low-carbon economy is growing, these jobs are too often low-wage, precarious, and degrading. We need to increase the federal minimum wage and enforce and improve labor standards by protecting workers' right to join or form a union with legislation like the PRO Act—whereby workers can use their power to bargain for and enforce wages, working conditions, and benefits.
- **Construct robust, fair supply chains that build worker power:** The IRA made strides in building up a US supply chain and domestic green industrial base, but more work is needed to create strong and equitable supply chains domestically and internationally. The next President should tackle supply chain issues associated with the green transition head-on. They should invest in comprehensive port development and shipbuilding for offshore wind; coordinate the greening of heavy industries like steel to lower impact; develop R&D in ecological materials for core goods like housing and auto manufacturing; and build new stuff like railways and mass transit. The US should also develop trade systems around new green manufacturing that foster high road business practices and ecological security globally. Progressives can put the resurgent labor movement in the driver's seat of a green industrial democracy and further break corporate control by advocating for a substantial corporate governance reform, public and worker ownership of strategic industrial assets, public procurement to create a floor for labor standards and community benefits.
- **Coordinate the energy transition:** To maximize speed and equity, we need the Federal government to coordinate a clean energy agenda that both makes massive investment in green energy infrastructure and manages the transition away from fossil fuels. The next Presidential Administration should end all new, and cancel all existing, leases for fossil fuel infrastructure, stand firm on a pause on LNG export terminals, and eliminate subsidies for the fossil fuel industry. It should also execute a coordinated plan to manage the transition away from fossil fuels in ways that protect communities and workers. We also need to advance a clean energy agenda that increases staff capacity and resources for permitting, zoning, and interregional planning of renewable energy and integrates community engagement and consent into project development. The Federal government should seek to limit renewable speculation, fill gaps in deployment, and lower community energy bills by investing in public renewable energy and nationalizing the gridlocked transmission system – from federally owned offshore wind to more accessible direct pay pathways for states and localities.

Ending Forever Wars

Problem

The world is wracked by intensifying Great Power conflicts, the rise of right-wing authoritarian regimes, and ongoing genocide in Gaza. These subject vast numbers of people to untold suffering and premature death, while also damaging the conditions of global cooperation urgently needed to tackle the climate crisis, the Global South debt crisis, and unchecked corporate power that undermines democracies around the globe. Meanwhile, the Global South has woefully insufficient resources to contend with the growing impacts of the climate and ecological crises, but international climate and biodiversity finance remains paltry and bound to ineffective market mechanisms.

Solution

As the largest historical emitter and current producer of fossil fuels, the US bears a particular responsibility to deliver solutions that contribute to peace, security, and prosperity around the world, but especially in the Global South. This must start with a strong pivot to a foreign policy focused on peace and the provision of resources to vulnerable communities that bear little responsibility for the climate crisis but that are feeling its impacts most severely.

- **End the Genocide in Gaza:** Prior to the invasion following the attacks of October 7, Gaza was already subject to political, economic, and ecological apartheid that significantly restricted the ability of its institutions to invest in climate and other environmental measures. Following the unprecedented destruction wrought by the genocide by way of US supplied weapons, Gaza is even more vulnerable to climate shocks, to say nothing of the broader regional instability US support for genocide is threatening to unleash. In order to achieve an immediate, permanent ceasefire in Gaza, the United States must impose an arms embargo on Israel that allows the long work of rebuilding to begin while averting further regional escalations.
- **Divest from the military:** The US military is the world's largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels. Scaling back military operations and closing bases will contribute immensely to decarbonization, and additional measures including a global military superfund and a comprehensive audit of environmental damage caused by military pollution should be prioritized to remediate degradation. The overstuffed National Defense Authorization Act must be trimmed significantly.

- **Move past colonial dynamics with the Global South:** The US government should lead efforts to pursue trade and investment relations that support, rather than hinder, climate-safe economic development of the Global South instead of deepening inequities that prioritize multinational corporate profit. This approach must center environmental protections, labor rights, climate safety, and equitable economic development, by facilitating technological transfer and investments in sustainable industrial policies in the Global South. This is particularly imperative in the Pacific region, where an offensive US posture, combined with bellicose rhetoric from both Democrats and Republicans, is deepening a new cold war with China to the detriment of both security and the prospects for climate cooperation. The next President should fully fund the Green Climate Fund, work with the IMF and World Bank to cancel Global South debt and fund climate finance, and engage in good faith discussions of loss and damages. A new vision of international relations can counteract the harmful legacy of “race to the bottom” globalization, and promote economic diversification, technological upgrading, and dignified jobs around the world.

Preventing Disasters & Protecting Migrant Safety

Problem

Extreme weather and climate disasters are on the rise, with blistering temperatures, fires, flooding, and hurricanes intersecting with unmaintained and poorly designed infrastructure increasing utility bills, destroying homes, and displacing entire communities. Millions of people in the US are now effectively priced out of home insurance markets as physical threats of water and fire grow.

Families are having to flee conflict intensified by climate and ecological disasters, both within the United States and abroad. However, for decades, the political center has lurched into alignment with the xenophobic right on questions of migration and border policy. When disaster strikes the response is often heavily militarized, followed by rebuilding in ways that reproduce a dangerous status quo by shifting risks rather than reducing them through proactive housing, land use, disaster mitigation, and migration policies.

Solution

The federal government must reduce the risks climate disasters pose to communities by adopting just and equitable housing, land use, and disaster mitigation policies. In moments of crises, the federal government should support people to navigate the realities and economic insecurity of being left without a home—be that internal to the United States or supporting migrants looking for a life free of violence and economic insecurity.

- **Invest in community resilience:** The federal government should support states to overhaul the home insurance system in a way that offers fair and equitable public insurance protection after disasters, and provides for comprehensive disaster risk reduction before disasters hit. Communities—particularly those that already face the brunt of environmental racism, injustice, and extraction—must be protected from the worst effects of climate crisis: for example, by ensuring forest restoration is tied to rural economic development and that increasingly at-risk coastal communities have viable adaptation strategies or just pathways to relocation. More broadly, federal funds must be made available for critical adaptation priorities, including sewerage and drainage upgrades, changes in federal agricultural subsidies that improve ecosystem health, and conservation policy that helps maintain biodiversity.
- **Demilitarize and decriminalize disaster response:** FEMA and other post-disaster funds should be directed towards a trained, non-police/military workforce that equitably responds to disasters while increasing community resilience. Reforms to the disaster response system must be coupled with robust adaptation measures and investments in communities assets that blunt the impact of disasters, like community health and care facilities, equitable planning approaches in high-risk areas, accessible resilience centers to convene in moments of extreme weather, and careful deployment of resources to rebuild resiliently for all communities impacted when disaster strikes.
- **Enable humane migration policy:** A progressive approach to migration must be humane, abide by international law, and factor in the US's role in exacerbating the circumstances that are driving migration—from environmental change to poverty exacerbated by the US-designed and maintained structure of the global economy. The US must offer funding for countries and communities in the Global South to contend with the root causes of migration and become a champion of humane policies for refugees and migrants (both domestically and worldwide). This approach must reduce the harsh and ecologically destructive militarization of the US border and criminalization of migrants no matter their reason for migrating while creating clear, achievable pathways to legal status for millions of undocumented people who have made their lives in the United States.

Conclusion

A comprehensive, justice-oriented climate agenda is the clear pathway not only to rapid decarbonization, but also building the winning political majorities we need. This work is more urgent than ever—and will continue beyond November 2024. By offering bold, progressive policy solutions to urgent issues in our political economy which are compounded by climate emergency, we can both improve the lives of working people and help the planet thrive.

It's time to seize the opportunity for change that delivers a greener, fairer future for all.