

Global Warming, Youth, and the Democratic Party—A Conversation

July 2
All,

Young people are rising up against so many horrors of this country: racism, gun violence, the immoral immigration policies, and now they're coming out in protests against global warming!

While we're not young people, we understand a lot about this system, and we have an important vision of the kind of world we believe would create equality, justice and freedom for all, and we can easily share our many organizing strategies (ways to connecting unions, communities, neighborhoods, organizations, & alliances, etc). I believe we all need to become more active, if people can, because these young people will learn from us & we will learn from them! And together we will have a far more substantial impact.

Honestly, whenever I speak up at rallies, whether it's in the Bronx or at other locations, I always talk about the bigger picture, how both parties are financed by the rich, how it's the system we live under that we have to change to make this a better world, and people always come up to me and ask for my phone number, and info so we can be connected. That's why I think we should all be as active as we can be.

Mary

Here's the message I received in my other email:

From: "Ilana Cohen & 350.org" <350@350.org>

Date: July 2, 2018 at 1:02:58 PM EDT

To: "Mary Hemings" <maryatbcjn@gmail.com>

Subject: Zero Hour for the climate

Reply-To: 350@350.org

Mary,

This is Zero Hour for the climate.

Young people are growing up in a world already shaken by the impacts of climate change — from year-round wildfires to Category 6 hurricanes to deadly heat waves year after year. *These young people may also be the last generation who can do anything to stop the worst of this crisis.*

That's why, on July 21, a movement led by high schoolers of color will march in New York, DC, and around the country to demand our elected officials take bold action to protect young people and our futures — before it's too late.

[Sign up here to stand with young leaders and join the Zero Hour climate march in New York on July 21.](#)

As the Trump administration disregards the dignity and human rights of young people and their families, we have a responsibility to stand with youth who are fighting to protect our collective future and prevent the worst impacts of climate change.

Zero Hour is a youth-led movement founded to center the diverse voices of young people in conversations about climate and environmental justice — and to advocate for the young people most affected by climate change. And here at 350.org, we are proud to be supporting their critical work.

On July 19, a wave of young activists will descend on Capitol Hill to lobby elected leaders for a just transition to a 100% renewable energy-powered future. Then, on Saturday, July 21, youth will march alongside thousands of supporters like you and demand an end to business as usual on climate change once and for all.

[Join young leaders in calling for the just, bold climate action we need to protect our futures. March with Zero Hour in New York City on July 21.](#)

The fossil free world we need is already on its way: from the explosive growth of renewables to the wave of cities and states voting to block dirty fossil fuel projects, you see signs that our movement is winning everywhere you look. Now, we need to push more leaders to step up before we've lost our chance to stop the worst of this crisis.

By keeping up a loud, steady drumbeat of demands for climate solutions – in the streets, in our communities, along the route of fossil fuel pipelines, at the ballot box, and everywhere in between – we're sending a clear message that our movement is too big to be ignored.

[They're hearing us. Keep making noise. Join the youth-led Zero Hour climate march in New York on July 21.](#)

With resolve,
Ilana Cohen, Zero Hour NYC Co-Coordinator
& the [350.org](#) team

PS: Not in NYC? There are Zero Hour sister marches happening across the country on July 21. [Check out the map of Zero Hour marches and find an action near you here.](#)

July 20
Mary,

Apparently the message that you forwarded is from a group associated with [350.org](#), which was founded by Bill McKibben. Have you had much contact with them? What's your impression of [350.org](#) and its practice?

Thanks,
Jack

July 20
Jack,

A few years ago I joined Bronx Climate Justice North (BCJN), which is the Bronx affiliate of 350.org, because they were doing interesting work about a lot of important struggles. During my initial time with BCJN, we worked both locally in the Bronx and with 350 in NYC. Some of us went to a number of their protests in Manhattan and upstate NY, as well as to some of their meetings on the Upper West Side at NY Society for Ethical Culture where they hold meetings & events, so, I got to know a number of people who play significant leadership roles. And we participated in a number of protests with them at many different locations in the city and upstate. And they supported the struggle of the Standing Rock Sioux against the Dakota Pipeline, as did we.

In the last year or two, we've been more locally based in the work that we're doing... Things like:

- Protests against police brutality when a cop punched a young man in the head 18 times & a video showed what he did.
- Work to defend a homeless facility that opened on Broadway in the Bronx that right-wing people protested.
- Local protests against the racists in Charlottesville awhile ago, and many recent protests for immigrants' rights.
- Working with people in the Bronx, with Mychael Johnson from South Bronx Unite, Ray Figueroa from Brook Park & NYC Community Garden Coalition, friends in Marble Hill and Kingsbridge, and many clergy & religious leaders, where we've held events.

In the more recent period, BCJN has become part of a coalition of groups (North Bronx Racial Justice Coalition, NBRJ) that collectively wants to organize events together. Our recent event about youth & gun violence was pretty significant... held at a church in Marble Hill, had a number of young speakers who had different experiences & backgrounds, and were quite radical, including a young man who had been formerly incarcerated, as well as a woman from the youth committee of Black Lives Matter. And we had a great turnout, almost 100 people were there.

So to answer your question about 350.org, I feel it's a pretty liberal group, but they take actions and organize around many important

things, and by taking action and bringing people together to fight against many horrors, there's room for more radical people to play a role. Their activities are often a great place to leaflet about a different approach or about upcoming activities.

Mary

July 3
Mary,

Thanks for your reply.

I have no doubt that Bronx Climate Justice North has engaged in struggles at the local level, and I think that it's important to engage in such struggles. Why would serious folks take us seriously if we didn't? So thanks for engaging — that's absolutely necessary.

Thanks for clarifying that BCJN is part of the 350.org network. I'd go beyond your characterization of it as "a pretty liberal group", though I think that it is that. Here are a few thoughts and questions:

First, if I recall correctly, Bill McKibben was the principal founder of 350.org. The name itself comes from McKibben's claim — at the time — that it was absolutely critical to keep atmospheric carbon levels below 350 parts per million — or else face disaster. This is characteristic of what I see as a panic-mongering attempt to stampede folks by saying "This is it. If we lose this immediate fight, all will be lost." This was said about holding atmospheric carbon to 350 ppm; then to 400ppm; it was said about the Keystone Pipeline (James Hansen, prominent atmospheric scientist connected with McKibben, stated flatly that if the Keystone Pipeline wasn't blocked it would be "game over" for life as we know it). Statements like these will stampede folks — but after a while one has to wonder whether they aren't manipulative and disingenuous, and whether they aren't harmful to building a long term fight for what's necessary: a complete reorganization of society from the bottom up, rather than short term "this is our last chance so follow us" approaches that lead to channeling activism into pressuring Democratic politicians. McKibben certainly orients to the Democrats in just this way, and I think that 350.org does, at least nationally.

So second, I'm interested as to how BCJN, as a 350.org affiliate, is influenced by the above. Is there any pressure from the national 350.org? How do folks relate to the Democrats?

Third, and related: What's the reaction to the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez right in New York City? It seems to me that this is likely to be double-edged: it will likely encourage more activism, but much of this is likely to be channeled towards DSA, electoralism, and the Democrats (as we've seen so often). Ocasio-Cortez may well be a rising star for the "Bernies" — much younger (28), a Latina woman who's bright and charismatic, and working inside the electoral system with the DSA and the Democrats. Will there be sentiment for the kind of local demos, actions, and groupings that you reported on to orient towards working inside the system, like Ocasio-Cortez, and orienting local actions towards pressuring politicians. How can we relate to (or counter) that tendency?

Fourth, is there an audience in BCNJ for the Utopian — for the Bulletin, for (say) Ron's short book on Lenin, etc.? What could be done to help facilitate reaching folks (what kinds of articles, topics, etc.?)

I am not expecting definitive answers to my questions. I think, or at least hope, that we can share thoughts about questions like these and, through dialogue, help better understand how to combine activism with the need for libertarian socialism.

Jack

July 5
Hi Jack,

Your questions are great! Your comments about Bill McKibben are correct, but he lives in Vermont, and he's not very involved with folks here in NYC, even though he's the major leader of the 350 organization.

After marching in the huge NYC climate march in September of 2014 with a couple friends, I decided to get involved in the movement, so I found BCJN, which was located quite close to me

here in the Bronx. Although a few of us initially went to many events in Manhattan, where 350 NYC holds its meetings, our focus was on both local organizing and major events, such as protests against the AIM pipeline, the Keystone pipeline, the Indian Point nuclear power plant, the Dakota Access Pipeline, in defense of the Standing Rock Sioux, etc., as well work for the farmworkers in NYS.

Initially there were quite a few people involved with BCJN, but now the number of active people is quite small. While we still have a large mailing list, and sometimes lots of folks will turn out for something, the active core is quite small. The coordinator, Jen, is pretty radical, and she's a former friend of Joanne Landy. And Wayne has also been somewhat involved. As an organization, BCJN is not oriented to the DP, though one person on the steering ctte leans that way. So the core of the organization is to the left of the DP. Over time we've developed important relationships with various organizations and religious centers in the northwest section the Bronx, as well as with important allies in the south Bronx, including Ray from Brook Park, South Bronx Unite, and many others.

Our recent event about youth and gun violence was an amazing success because of the relevant topic, an amazing panel, extensive leafleting, and the coalition we created to bring this together: North Bronx Racial Justice Coalition.

I think Ocasio-Cortez's victory is pretty interesting because it reflects the extent to which young people are rising up against the powers that be. Yes, she's a democrat, so we'll see what she does, but it may be interesting to see her response to the DP system, because it's so corrupt and I'm sure she hopes to make a difference. The fact that she's quite local makes me want to keep up with what she does.

I believe many people, especially young folks, want to do what they can to make this a better world, which is why so many are becoming active to try to do something. So i feel more of us should try to become involved in important actions & organizations that are doing relevant things. We all have a significant understanding of how this system works and the ability to connect to people who want to fight the horrors that are escalating. And I believe we could collectively have some impact on what is happening if we all

became more active. I've been quite impressed by the number of people who have come up to me after I've made a few radical comments about this system at an event, which has happened several times in the last month. When I went to a protest against the horrible separation of immigrant families in New Rochelle a few days ago, after I spoke about the system we live under, several people came up to me and wanted information to stay in touch. So people are looking for a strategy, and trying to figure out what to do about this system. We have an answer, not an easy one, but one many people understand when we explain what democracy would look like from the bottom up, not the top down.

Yes, I do believe there's an audience for the Utopian, but BCJN is quite small. I believe our outreach in the communities offers even more potential. And the NBRJ coalition includes someone who is joining BCJN & I feel has excellent potential. I also feel that it would be helpful for our work to create some pamphlets that address different issues, and to create a pamphlet about who we are. Yes, we need to combine activism with our understanding of what libertarian socialism could be!

Mary

July 5
Hi Mary,

Thanks for your reply.

I guess that 350.org must vary quite a bit from area to area. In the Bay Area, they seem to be pretty influenced by their national organization, and orient quite a bit to trying to pressure local and Congressional Democrats. In fact, most of the activism in the Bay Area is being influenced in one way or another by the Democrats. For example, in the city of Richmond (about 10 miles north of Oakland), the dominant political group is the Richmond Progressive Alliance, whose key organizer is Mike Parker (veteran IS leader, now in Solidarity) and includes other names that may be familiar (Ken Paff, Steve Early, Margaret Jordan — all in Solidarity). They are an open alliance of Greens, independents, and Democrats. In the 2016 presidential primary, Mike Parker (and others) changed their political affiliation from Green Party to Independent so that

they could cross over and vote for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party primary. And the most rapidly growing group in the area is DSA, which recently held an East Bay (Oakland / Berkeley / Richmond) meeting of several hundred, and is if anything bigger in San Francisco. And the dominant faction in DSA out here believes in working with, endorsing and voting for “progressive” Democrats.

That’s really just a brief and very sketchy take, but from what I can make out similar things are happening elsewhere. I hear that DSA in Brooklyn has between 500 and 1,000 turning out for some of their events. Many are activists, and most orient in one way or another to the Democrats (many have an “inside and outside” approach, meaning support “good” Democrats and don’t support “not so good” ones). Some left groups that have traditionally opposed the Democrats and Republicans have become at best fuzzy on the question — for example, many members of Solidarity no longer see opposition to the Democrats as a principle and will support some Democrats (many of them supported Bernie Sanders, for example).

So I’m a little bit surprised that only one person in the BCJN steering committee orients towards the Democrats. I expect that the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will have some impact on this. She’s a really intelligent, young, engaging, articulate Latina woman and DSA member who advocates a pretty radical program: abolish ICE; national health care; universal public education through college; decent housing for all; etc. Already, left groups are lining up to support her (and, by extension, others who follow in her footsteps running as Democrats) or debating whether to do so: from what I can tell, most of Solidarity is in support; there’s a debate in ISO; Socialist Alternative (Kshama Sawant, the socialist Seattle City Council person, is in that group) supported Ocasio-Cortez from the ghetto; etc. I think that many, perhaps most, who have traditionally in principle opposed the Democrats may well cross over to supporting Ocasio-Cortez and other insurgents. Many traveled at least part way down this path with Bernie Sanders. Ocasio-Cortez may take this much further — I think that she’s more likely to appeal to activists, to people of color, to young people than Bernie.

So I think that it’s really important for us to be clear about where we stand vis a vis what I think is an emergent tendency to abandon

opposition to the Democrats. I think that we need to review why we've been in principle opposed to the Democrats, but as well I think that we have to ask where the emerging movement is going and whether we ought to revise our long-time position given the current context. In particular, I think that we should ask: do we think that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (and others in the DSA) are likely to take over the Democratic Party, or to split it, or even to have a major influence on its policies. Or is it more likely that these activist / politicians will, consciously or not, help corral activists and movements within the confines of the Democratic Party, as has so often happened in the past. Or, are other courses likely. From how I've posed this, you can probably guess my position: principled opposition to the Democratic Party, while trying to find ways to engage with and fight alongside activists in united front fashion — fighting for what's needed, but also being clear that we can't really get what's really needed without socialist reorganization of society.

I think that this is an important discussion, and hopefully we will get to discuss this at some length next month in New York, where I think that a discussion of how to relate to the Democratic Party is on the agenda.

Best,
Jack

July 6
Mary,

I want to add a bit to what I wrote yesterday.

I've spent some time reading up on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and also just watched an hour or more of interviews with her via YouTube. She has gotten much attention for calling for abolishing ICE, and also for calling for impeaching Trump. But something else is clear: she is for a Keynesian New Deal: higher taxes on the "haves" to fund jobs and services: guaranteed jobs, universal free higher education, health care for all, etc. And she's very clear that she thinks that the way to win this is by getting more Democrats elected, and by having a collaborative approach towards all Democrats (Pelosi included).

I think that we're likely to see a groundswell of support for Ocasio-Cortez's (and Bernie Sanders) approach: work collaboratively with the Democratic caucus in Congress (Ocasio-Cortez said this in each interview that I watched; Sanders has been part of the Democratic Caucus since 1990); call for a Keynesian welfare state / New Deal approach funded by higher and more progressive taxes (never mind that this won't come close to providing the funding needed for Ocasio-Cortez's program); and get this program adopted by electing more Democrats (in the process of doing so, almost surely the program will be watered down, in order to maintain "consensus" and "electability".)

I hope that we're all clear that this program can't be implemented without a truly radical restructuring of society. Attempted solutions in K-12 education, to take one example, have repeatedly run into this barrier: it's possible to improve conditions for some for a limited time, but those solutions don't scale. Just to provide the needed smaller class size would, by my estimate, run into the trillions of dollars — and this doesn't begin to deal with the massive problems in high poverty communities like the one in East Oakland (where I taught), where for some kids it's a struggle just to make it to school intact, where many haven't had a meal since school lunch the day before, where they're exposed to lead in the environment, live in group homes, etc. So new programs are tried, they work for some but not for most, and many parents out of desperation opt for the next variant that is sent down the pipe by the billionaires (like Eli Broad and Bill Gates). In other words: the deep-seated problems in education are rooted in class and race, and won't be solved under capitalism. We can fight to improve conditions, and we should (I did and still do), but we also need to be clear that lasting change for all (or even most) requires a radical reorganization of society (not a Keynesian welfare state, a la Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez).

Jack

July 8
Jack,

I completely agree with your comments about Ocasio-Cortez, what she's been trying to do, its impact on many others, as well as the limitations of her strategy. It's the increase in the numbers of

people, particularly young people, who are becoming active to try to make this a better world that I feel may lay the groundwork for a new kind of movement. Young people are fighting against many different issues: income inequality, poverty, the homeless situation, poor education, racism, police brutality, climate change, continuing wars, mass incarceration... and the list goes on. Most recently the significant protests around the country against the immoral immigration policies of this government, separating children from their parents, have mobilized many people who are holding protests all over. And the reality that there will be no easy way for many of these children to be reunited with their families makes me believe that this struggle will continue.

As I mentioned before, the activist young people who have become involved in these struggles are both liberals and radicals. And many of the deep problems in education are understood by these young people, many of whom are afraid that it won't be solved under capitalism, but they do not know what else to do! So that's why I believe that more of us should make connections to those who are continuing in these struggles, share our understanding about this system, what we believe is needed, how we envision a truly just and equitable society, what we need to do to get there, and our thoughts about how to build the movement we need to truly fight against this system. I know that many young people understand that a significant and lasting change for all will require a radical reorganization of society (not a Keynesian welfare state, a la Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez). Although many understand that the DP won't get us there, they know of no other way, and that's where we come in. We need to become more involved in various struggles, and areas where movements are building, so that we can help to make clear the need for a radical reorganization of society, not a Keynesian welfare state, including the need for a massive change to the education system so that all schools are as well organized as those of the elite with smaller class size, relevant instruction, interactive learning, etc..

To me the issue of the Democratic Party is its role in this society, as you clearly outlined in your email. They're an essential part of the tyranny of this system, using their pretense for a better world to help enable the system to continue. So I feel what's most important is to make clear the irrelevance of voting for them because they will not change anything of substance. But I also understand why a

number of people will want to vote for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez because she's for many good things greatly needed by people. So I feel we need to have conversations with those people to help them understand how this system works. I don't care if people vote for democrats because they view the vote as a lesser evil, but I do care whether they understand the system and are willing to become part of the struggle against it. So while I agree with your stated principled opposition to the DP, I feel the most important aspect of that opposition is finding ways to have meaningful conversations with those who need to more fully understand the role the DP plays. We need to share strategies about how to engage in these struggles and fight along side other activists in the struggle.

Mary

July 9
Mary,

Thanks for your reply. I have read it through, and think that I need to respond: I do care about whether people swallow lesser evilism; I don't agree that voting for Democrats is irrelevant but think that it's a trap. And while I myself have been an activist for years, I expect that there are several on the Utopian list who can best contribute in other ways. For example, I expect that Ron's time is better spent in the thinking and writing that he does than it would be as an activist.

I think that we need to be clear on what's going on: what does the mainstream of the Democratic Party represent; what do Warren, Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez represent; why are they in the same party; why are they not irrelevant; why is Ocasio-Cortez a Democrat, and what happens if we scratch the surface (for example: Ocasio-Cortez wants ICE abolished, but would have the Immigration and Naturalization Service take on ICE's work); and why supporting Sanders / Ocasio-Cortez / ... will lead to channeling whatever movements there are into focusing on the November elections and then, ultimately, demoralization. This — corralling people, and potential movements, into narrow electoral activity and convincing them that somehow the Democrats will deliver some of what they need and convincing them that neoliberalism (Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer...) is a "lesser evil" — is why voting for the

Democrats is not irrelevant at all. It's why we do need to be concerned about "lesser evilism."

For example, take the red state teachers. I wrote a report on the meeting I attended in Oakland at which four leaders of strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky and Arizona spoke, and I found the event uplifting. But unfortunately, the strategy of the red state teacher leaders now is to run candidates in the November elections to try to take over local and state school boards, legislatures, etc. They will be running as Democrats. This is not irrelevant. It's turning the movement — the most significant strikes in years — back in on itself, back into the system.

I appreciate that you understand and articulate that major enduring positive change requires reorganizing society from the bottom up — socialism, not capitalism. So I wouldn't be emphasizing the points on why voting for the Democrats isn't irrelevant and why we should care if people are voting for the Democrats as a lesser evil if I didn't think that it's critical for us to be as clear on these points as it is to be clear on the need for system change.

Jack
