The Dream of America's Green Revolution Lives On

DENMARK

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From the Motor City to the capital of green energy. In Detroit, Michigan I met a fighting young climate activist and a trade unionist retired from the U.S. automotive industry who both want to save the planet. Joe Biden was not their preferred presidential candidate, but the activists feel that he will listen to them.

Journalist Emil Jørgensen covered the U.S. presidential elections for The newspaper Danmark. Read his weekly column and articles in the newspaper and hear him in the Podcast Denmark. The podcast Denmark can be reached via Nyhedskiosken or via the QR code here. Emil Jørgensen's stories from the United States are developed in response to questions from readers. If you have input, questions, or ideas for Emil, write to him at https://spørgre-daktionen.fyens.dk/usa/

USA:

Nine years. That is the apocalypse deadline to save the planet from man-made climate change. A deadline which the UN has given the globe, one that 29-year old Kelly Eubank builds her life around. And nine years, says Kelly, is optimistic. While sitting at a Detroit cafe, sipping a lavender latte with oat milk, her eyes reflected desperation during her interview with Avisen Danmark, “We are not just moving toward a catastrophe. We’re already there,” she says.

Forest fires have razed California. Over the past five years, Texas has been hit by “once in 500 years” storms. Globally, nine million people die annually due to air pollution. I do not understand how people can act as if things are normal. And why people in power do not take this seriously.”

Kelly is not alone. She belongs to the growing group of young people who, with strikes and demonstrations, are trying to push the adults into action now with a President-elect who may be responsive.

Kelly Eubank is 29 years old and part of the Sunrise Movement. She organizes in Michigan, one of the leaders of the Detroit Hub. In the movement, young people all the way down to 15-years-old lead the movement, right now trying to pull President-elect Biden in a more progressive direction.
Sunrise Movement

Kelly sighs deeply and sits silently for a few thoughtful seconds when I mention Joe Biden's name. She does not like him. As part of the Sunrise Movement - a young, forward-looking climate movement - she sees the Democrats' leadership as guardians of the status quo.

The Sunrise Movement was founded in 2017 with a view of the solution to the country’s multiple problems: the “Green New Deal.” It’s a comprehensive bill which, within 10 years, would usher in 100 percent renewable energy in the electricity grid, Federal job guarantees and universal health care. Bernie Sanders championed the Green New Deal in the democratic primary elections, where the founder of Sunrise Movement, Varshini Prakash, publicly gave Joe Biden’s climate policy thumbs down.

Biden, in his many years in American politics, has never been progressive when it came to the climate, Kelly says.

Recounting the early November debates with Trump, she shouted at her television when Biden promised that he does not want to stop the extraction of oil and gas using the controversial fracking method.

Joe Biden listened

Still, Kelly spent up to 40 hours per week leading up to the presidential election on November 3rd, calling voters and urging them to vote for Biden. Why? Partly because the alternative, Donald Trump, has no intention of combating climate change and partly because Joe Biden has actually adopted the fuse of the progressive left - in a good way.

After the victory in the primary election Biden invited Bernie Sanders and the Sunrise Movement to help him design a climate policy. They did not come out of the negotiations with the Green New Deal. Nevertheless, Biden has the most ambitious climate plan presented by a presidential candidate.

$2,000 billion will be invested in green conversion in a corona stimulus package to ensure that the United States is back on track economically, at the same time that the entire U.S. social economy by year 2050 is converted to be CO2-neutral.

“Biden is not our candidate but at least he listens to us,” says Kelly Eubank. A study from the New York Times reports that 80 percent of all 18-29-year-olds in the U.S. support the future president’s climate plans.

There are plenty of Resistance activists. However, Donald Trump has not thrown in the towel, and is arranging large voter rallies to rile up its voter base.

Internally in the Democratic Party there are open quarrels between the Conservative and progressive wings. Right-wing media commentators question how far Biden can go before the U.S. sees uprisings like France’s “Yellow Vests.” In the country where the expression, “I come from the government and I want to help you,” is terrifying to large parts of the Republican electorate, state regulations and intervention in the name of climate change does not appear to be beneficial. (cont’d p.3)

Frank Hammer

Why not declare a state of emergency and restructure Detroit’s automotive industry for the production of sustainable vehicles and infrastructure? This is what Frank Hammer proposes. He is the former Chairman of United Auto Workers Local 909, the trade union for workers at a Detroit area GM factory. He liked that Joe Biden’s climate policy is more far-reaching.

Photo: Emil Jørgensen
FACTS—GREEN NEW DEAL VS. BIDEN’S CLIMATE PLAN

Green New Deal will, within a 10-year horizon:

- Eliminate emissions of greenhouse gases from industry, agriculture and transport sector
- Restructure the entire electricity consumption to 100 percent green electricity from renewable energy
- Secure all Americans access to clean water
- Tax-financed education, training and job security for all
- Universal health insurance
- CO2-neutral economy in the year 2050
- Investments of 2,000 billion dollars in green conversion, Including 40 percent earmarked to the historically most vulnerable areas
- Re-entry into the Paris Agreement
- Eliminate Trump’s anti-climate change hostility decrees

Biden's climate plan is hardly so radical, but it is more concrete.

(cont’d from p. 2) But new winds are blowing across the U.S. which, in Detroit, are illustrated in the form of activists fighting the climate battle side by side with Kelly Eubank and the Sunrise Movement. “Young people don’t have a monopoly on being afraid that we will leave a devastated planet to future generations,” says Frank Hammer. He is 77 years old and has fought for a working-class revolution his entire adult life. In the 1960’s he was part of the student uprising at the Berkeley campus of the University of California. After earning degrees in Sociology and Architecture, he and his wife made a life-changing decision. If they really believed in their ideals, they had to integrate themselves in the working class.

Frank first got a job at an industrial rubber factory in Boston, and then at a GM car plant in Detroit. He worked for more than 30 years in the automotive industry in the center of what is called Motor City, because Ford, Chrysler and General Motors all have their headquarters there.

Frank was elected Bargaining Chairman of his United Auto Workers local union and witnessed from the inside how globalization, automation and neoliberalism reduced the ranks of his colleagues. The heavy job losses led to Detroit’s declared bankruptcy in 2013. Today Detroit is one of the poorest cities in the United States. (cont’d p. 4)

Climate arsenal

In the lead up to World War II, the U.S. auto industry was ordered to replace car production with military production. The companies did it practically overnight and Detroit came to be known as the "Arsenal of Democracy." Detroit should now do the same thing, though this time in the name of climate.

- Frank Hammer, retired union leader in the "Motor City," Detroit
In an empty parking lot, along a barbed-wire fence circling around a huge factory building, Frank shared nostalgic memories from his old workplace and its green dreams for the future. He points out that Detroit's motor industry had proven to be adaptable in the past.

“At the start of the second world war, Detroit was ordered to restructure car production for military production. The conversion was rapid, and the city became known as the ‘Arsenal of Democracy,’” says Frank. He’s got an infectious energy as a veteran autoworker who has given many speeches for his “Comrades”. Now Detroit should do it again but, this time, in the name of climate. The situation is today at least as alarming.

In Frank’s eyes, it is not just a necessity. It is also a unique opportunity. The proportion of citizens without jobs in Michigan rounded 24 percent earlier this year, and is still at almost 10 percent. If Joe Biden invests some of the $2,000 billion in producing electric cars and green infrastructure in Detroit, he secures not just the future, says the veteran union leader. Biden would also secure lots of jobs.

“I do not know how many jobs, but I know that it is the chance to get a lot of people back to work to fight against climate change as part of the green transition,” Frank Hammer said, hopefully.