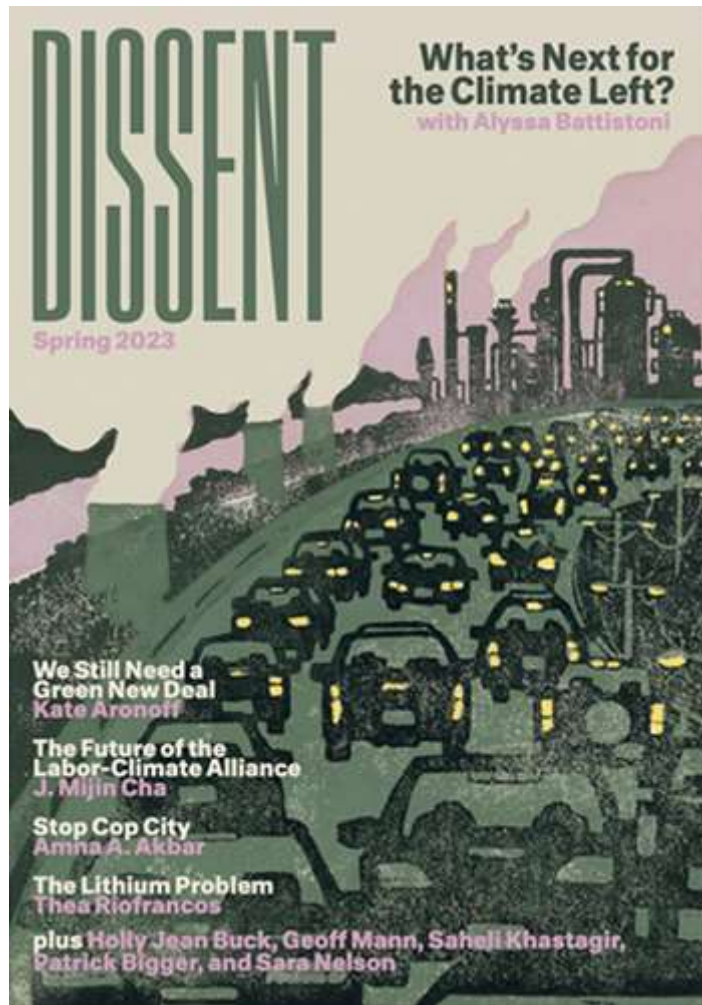


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Fighting Fire and Fascism in the American West

Ecological crisis, rural deindustrialization, and real estate speculation have created conditions in which the far right thrives.



A homemade sign in Sublimity, Oregon, posted during a wildfire in September 2020.

(Nathan Howard/Getty Images)

Late in the summer of 2020, forests across the western United States were on fire. In that year alone, California experienced six of the twenty largest fires in its recorded history, including the North Complex Fire, which killed sixteen people and burned more than 300,000 acres. Further north, the Beachie Creek and Lionshead fires merged near the Oregon-Washington border, ultimately burning more than 600 square miles (an area roughly half the size of Rhode Island) and killing five people. Across the West, more than 10 million acres burned—the second-highest annual figure since record-keeping began—incurring \$18.9 billion in economic losses and firefighting costs.

In the febrile atmosphere of the looming presidential election and nationwide racial justice protests, the fire crisis pushed some Oregon reactionaries into action. Rumors quickly spread that Portland-based anti-fascists and Black Lives Matter organizers were setting fires to punish their rural (white) enemies and then looting evacuated areas. These rumors were boosted across social media and by a QAnon “drop,” leading militia members to set up armed checkpoints to search for arsonists. While the militias failed to turn up any antifa arsonists, they did offer a kind of social response—albeit paranoid, violent, and

exclusionary—to the effects of climate change. It's a response that risks becoming more common as the ecological crisis deepens.

The scope and urgency of the wildfire crisis in the U.S. West are forcing communities and governments to respond, but the ultimate form of the response is yet to be determined. Milton Friedman infamously quipped that “when [a] crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” Gaps in state action have left at-risk communities to formulate their own theories about the causes and consequences of socio-ecological breakdown, and as the far right surges across the rural West, it is leaving plenty of warped ideas “lying around.” Strange mutations and alignments are starting to take shape among different factions of the right, including Trumpist Republicans, libertarian localists, and eco-fascists, against this backdrop of punishing environmental change—and in many cases they are starting to take power.

The roots of this problem are far-reaching: more than 100 years of intensive logging and wholesale fire suppression have made forests denser, more homogenous, and more dominated by non-fire-adapted species, decreasing their resilience. These changes are magnified by the effects of climate change, including drought, extreme heat, insect infestations, and high-wind events. With the belated recognition that improved management practices are urgently needed, state and federal resources are beginning to flow to forest restoration, which involves thinning and controlled burning. But these interventions are not coming quickly enough to keep pace with the crisis, nor in ways that support transformative reinvestment in forest communities. Long-term declines in the logging industry have left both the land and people in vast swaths of the country abandoned by the state and by capital, and a huge mobilization of resources and labor will be needed to start undoing more than a century of damaging forestry practices.

A green industrial policy for the rural West could invest in sustainable industries and high-quality jobs, while building on the existing knowledge and skills of rural communities. Such an approach must also involve initiatives to strengthen Indigenous resource governance and support the ongoing revival of traditional management practices that have been criminalized since Spanish colonization. A progressive green industrial policy that delivers material improvements to rural communities is a necessary condition for battling the far right across the West.

Incendiary Conditions

Megafires that cover more than 100,000 acres are now so common they are no longer tracked as exceptional events by the National Interagency Fire Center, and 30 million homes in the United States are at risk from wildfires. This fire regime both reflects and produces alarming environmental conditions, including a historic drought that has dried out cities, farms, and forests; smoke that chokes skies throughout fire season; the billions of tons of CO₂ released by fires; and local effects like mudslides, degraded water supplies, and the loss of habitats for vulnerable species.

These ecological conditions are coupled with the grim social realities of rural deindustrialization, real estate speculation, and environmental change. California has lost more than three-quarters of its saw mills since the 1980s, and logging jobs across the West have declined by 40 percent since 1997. Much of the rural West has become significantly more unequal than it was fifty years ago—a process that accelerated dramatically amid the economic carnage of the 2008 financial crisis, and then again as white-collar migration driven by pandemic remote work turbocharged rural gentrification. Many rural communities are suffering from the social problems that come with deindustrialization: economic precarity, addiction, and exposure to the criminal justice system have all been exacerbated by the structural reorganization of rural political economy.

Declining standards of living, with little apparent prospect for improvement, have created conditions in which the right thrives. Across the United States, far-right organizations, protests, and political violence have been on a sharp upswing since 2008. They accelerated again after the Trump election: incidents of right-wing political, racist, misogynist, and anti-LGBTQ violence (which have included the explicitly eco-fascist mass murders in El Paso in 2019 and Buffalo in 2022) have all spiked since 2016. More recently, there has been a marked rise in armed protests across the West, with mobilizations against pandemic public health measures morphing into support of stolen-election conspiracy theories. As outright political violence has increased, so has apologism for that violence within the mainstream right.

Support for Republicans has risen in many rural Western counties over the past twenty years, coinciding with the party's drift rightward. According to data from the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, the West has a particularly high concentration of state legislators who belong to right-wing social media groups. Common themes in these groups include portrayals of regional big cities as policy failures and dens of iniquity, rejection of state authority in some areas (like public health and environmental regulation) alongside full-throated support for repressive state functions such as policing and border enforcement, and ubiquitous calls to "save America" or to put "America first."

The Far Right in the Forests

The January 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol has become the iconic image of far-right mobilization, but the year before, right-wing activists had already tried, in some cases successfully, to breach state capitols or governors' mansions in California, Oregon, Idaho, and Washington. There has also been a flurry of environmentally tinged far-right outbursts over the past decade, including the Bundy family's standoffs with the Bureau of Land Management over grazing rights, which culminated in the occupation of the Malheur wilderness area in Oregon in 2016. More prosaically, far-right candidates have won numerable government offices, from county sheriff seats to governorships, putting important levers of power in the hands of libertarians, Christian dominionists, QAnon fabulists, and militia members.

Nostalgia plays an important role in the far-right imagination, and there is no doubt that communities in the West (and elsewhere) have genuinely lost economic freedoms as industry has declined. These losses are stacked on top of others, including environmental regulations that are experienced as austerity. We can broadly characterize these events as reverberations of the closure of frontiers. In this case, the closure is the end of what Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore call "cheap nature."

For 250 years, the U.S. social compact rested on the availability of cheap land and abundant resources for settlers and their descendants, which stood in lieu of a robust welfare state. The history of the cheap-nature frontier in the West started with Indigenous genocide and the direct exploitation of timber and

minerals, and was later characterized by sprawling suburbanization and dependence on cars. But this frontier has been squeezed economically and by environmental policy since the 1970s. Its last vestiges are disappearing as the ecology itself degrades. The overarching response of the right has been to attempt to push back by reopening land for resource exploitation (through privatization) while limiting who has access to the proceeds by, for example, restricting immigration.

The far right thrives on the belief that things can only get worse. Unfortunately, decades of federal public-land policy and developments in regional and global political economy have provided plenty of evidence that this is the case. In turn, the right reaches the conclusion that waning forms of privilege have to be violently maintained and policed.

Last October, a right-wing sheriff in Oregon arrested a U.S. Forest Service “burn boss” whose prescribed fire treatment had charred a rancher’s fence—an incident that signals a simmering conflict between authoritarian localism and federal authority. Similarly, a giant New Mexico fire that was touched off by a controlled burn gone bad last summer will be used as evidence that the federal government is either incompetent or actively hostile to the rural West and that communities must “take back control” and seal themselves off from outsiders. As the effects, if not the causes, of climate change become of greater concern on the right, it becomes more likely that we’ll see the weaponization of emergency. And if reactionary figures are in control of local and federal government, we could easily see anti-government militia members turning into paramilitary foot soldiers to enforce emergency measures against the villains du jour.

Narrow Responses to the Wildfire Crisis

The wildfire crisis is so dire that even reactionary state officials agree on the necessity of action on forest restoration. There is virtual consensus on the need to reduce forest densities and restore more diverse forest conditions, but these measures are not being implemented quickly enough to keep pace with the crisis. The conservative approach is essentially to devolve land management authority to states that have less robust labor and environmental protections, shift the focus to fire suppression, and roll back environmental protections in order to

fast-track private logging and other forms of extraction—usually carried out by precarious workers (many of them migrants) with few job protections.

The current liberal alternative to the far right—a “Big Green” NGO approach to forest management carried out through public-private partnerships and carbon offsetting—simply isn’t up to the task, especially given the current low-road trajectory of much forestry work: most jobs are poorly paid, seasonal, contingent, and high risk. Even more troubling is the fact that, as researcher Alex Amend puts it, “mainstream environmentalism has shown itself to be vulnerable to ‘fascist creep’”: far-right approaches to ecological crisis have been adopted by otherwise left-leaning environmentalists, along with concepts that echo the racist, xenophobic roots of the original conservation movement.

The retrograde, exclusionary tendencies of liberal environmentalism fuel the “jobs vs. environment” deadlock that has long plagued North American environmental politics. The forests of the U.S. West have been a particularly entrenched battleground in this conflict. During the infamous “Timber Wars” of the 1980s and ’90s, environmentalism became a scapegoat for the ongoing ailments of the timber industry and the attendant abandonment of working people. In turn, there is still substantial hostility among many grassroots environmental groups toward any timber extraction.

Policymakers in Washington, D.C., and Western states are finally beginning to reckon with the magnitude of the wildfire crisis. But for decades, “fire borrowing”—the practice of paying firefighting costs by drawing from elsewhere in the Forest Service budget—eroded funding for forest restoration. New funding models and additional investment through the Federal Wildfire Crisis Strategy, the Inflation Reduction Act, and state appropriations all represent small steps toward safer forest landscapes and communities. More funding aimed at landscape-wide restoration—around \$5 to 6 billion per year—is needed to make a meaningful dent in the restoration backlog across the West. And that is without considering the investments in housing, transportation, job training, and healthcare that are needed to stabilize and revitalize rural communities.

Rural Ecosocialism

A left approach to the wildfire crisis would prioritize ecological repair through investments in rural landscapes and communities under the banner of forest restoration. This restorative framework would not produce a new frontier to be exploited but would instead support the care work required to heal and sustain life. This means supporting ecological health while rejecting the nostalgia and xenophobia that the right serves up in place of material answers to material questions.

This is a critical challenge and a worthwhile fight—not only because the stakes of the wildfire emergency are so high but also because overcoming the stalemate of the long Timber Wars would be a critical win in the larger struggle for green industrial policies. Improved land management policies would be a powerful proof-of-concept for a Green New Deal in rural communities across the country that have been used, abused, and abandoned by capital—and often by the state as well. Green industrial policy could mobilize people and resources to care for forests that may be facing irreparable change while creating hundreds of thousands of long-term, well-paid jobs—not only in “woods work,” but in manufacturing, energy, transportation, and a variety of sectors that utilize biomass removed from overstocked woodlands. This kind of program would require pro-worker policies that support sustainable industries, long-term employment, and safe working conditions.

A holistic industrial policy for ecological forest management would include investment from public infrastructure banks to use the waste products of forest restoration to support new rural industries—such as biomass energy generation, which can power new manufacturing capacity for advanced wood products. Workforce development policies and programs could create career pathways for formerly incarcerated firefighters (who represent the most diverse segment of the firefighting workforce) and prioritize tribal enterprises and worker-owned cooperatives. In all these areas, effective democratic governance of land management is critical to ensure that the manifold benefits of forest restoration and reduced fire risk accrue to everyone in forest communities, but particularly to those who have been harmed by previous regimes of forest management. This is important both as a matter of equity and as a political objective to alleviate conditions that contribute to far-right drift.

The crisis in rural communities also presents possibilities for community-driven development that links social and ecological health. For instance, in 2009, federal legislation aimed at encouraging dialogue between groups that had long been at odds with one another facilitated the formation of forest collaboratives in which loggers, environmentalists, tribes, and community leaders can work toward community management of forests with multiple goals in mind. Some environmental groups have pointed to the undue influence of logging interests in these collaboratives, enabled in part by the Forest Service's model of funding restoration work through timber sales. But relationships and collaborative practices developed within these groups, when supplemented with additional resources for rural community and economic development, could help create conditions for building coalitions in support of green industrial policy.

The West is not the only place where socio-ecological breakdown, rooted in decades of environmental degradation and state abandonment, is fueling reactionary politics. From fisheries in New England to Midwestern farmland and areas struck by water crisis in the Southeast, the contradictions of the end of cheap nature are reaching critical levels. The Green New Deal and other visions for ecosocialism have largely focused on cities, giving less attention to non-human nature and rural places. But workers in forestry, agriculture, and other rural industries occupy a pivotal position at the intersection of social and ecological systems. It is critical for the left to articulate a strategy that mobilizes the place-based knowledge and experiences of working-class rural communities to address their needs. If we don't, the right will.

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