What’s already happening in Coventry?

The inaugural Coventry for a Green New Deal workshop was preceded by an excellent event organised by Tony McNally from Climate Change Solutions that informed people about what was already being done in Coventry to meet the decarbonisation targets set by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Coventry City Council’s Colin Knight began the day with an exhaustive list of the Council’s attempts to meet the nationally set target of zero net emissions – in which carbon emissions and carbon absorption through natural carbon sinks are cancelled out – by 2050. The Council has introduced energy efficient street lighting and a ‘Heatline’ system where heat released by incinerator in Whitley heats the Council House and The Wave water park. The Council has also introduced 133 operational electric vehicle charge points – the 3rd highest number outside London, Knight insisted – a number that would rise to 215 by March 2020. In 2020 there will also be 10 electric buses on the roads of Coventry operated by National Express, partly powered by solar panels on the bus depot roof, he promised.
In the future, Knight said the Council would like to explore the creation of Electric Vehicle (EV) Centres that aimed to emulate traditional petrol stations by providing ‘ultra-fast’ charging points for electric vehicles and services such as snacks, coffee and toilets to those filling up their vehicles. As part of its Climate Change Strategy – which is currently being updated and would be out for consultation early next year – the Council was also exploring the possibility of building a ‘very light rail’ in the city. Other proposals discussed by Knight were:

- Addressing fuel poverty in Coventry – which was currently at 15.3%, compared to the England average of 11.1% – by supporting people in the city to insulate and heat their homes with grants, switch to cheaper energy tariffs, reduce their energy bills and energy usage and understand their bills and meters better;

- Building a new 175,000 tonne capacity recycling plant in the area, in partnership with Solihull, Walsall, Nuneaton and Bedworth, North Warwickshire, Rugby and Stratford upon Avon;

- And planting a new tree for every citizen in Coventry.

Another important contribution in the morning meeting was from Susan Juned, director of Heart of England Community Energy – a community benefit society which owns the largest community solar farm in the UK, with 60,000 solar panels generating 15 megawatts for the people of Stratford-upon-Avon since 2016. ‘By buying out existing solar assets on behalf of the community from a commercial developer and enabling community ownership’, Susan said that the project ‘helped local people to take a stake in their local energy infrastructure and benefit from future profits from the project’. As an ‘asset-locked’ society owned by its members, governed by local volunteer directors and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, the organisation was able to ‘recycle’ its profits back into the Heart of England area by supporting local charities and projects with a positive social and environmental impact. A model for green community owned and run businesses in Coventry, Heart of England Community Energy also supported an initiative to tackle climate change and poverty in developing countries.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the morning, Coventry Trades Council president Jane Nellist argued that all citizens in the UK and across the world needed to be engaged in a ‘just transition’ to a decarbonised, green economy. Investment should be focused not on propping up the profits of multinational companies that have driven climate change, but rather on the needs of the millions of British people suffering as a result of austerity – also a consequence of corporate greed and speculation, she pointed out. The trade union movement, has 6 million members in the country, has been researching and advocating for a green transformation for many years. However, Nellist paid tribute to young people like like Greta Thunberg who have now pushed these issues to the fore. Nellist quoted Thunberg speaking at the World Economic Forum: ‘Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few.’

The current economic system is not capable of making the necessary changes, Nellist said. ‘Bluntly,’ she continued, ‘the capitalist system needs to be replaced, we need to unleash the huge potential
and talent of workers and communities.’ The idea that system change – a socialist transformation, even – was needed was gaining support across the world, she argued especially amongst the young. For example, consolidating, nationalising and democratising energy and transport sectors would allow us to plan much better. Nellist ended by urging for the Council’s new Climate Change Strategy to be taken out into communities, to begin a ‘huge conversation’ about a Green New Deal in Coventry. She noted the example of the Lucas Plan, which leveraged the experience and tacit knowledge of workers and communities to create an alternative plan for Lucas Aerospace, converting the firm from making weapons to socially useful and environmentally sustainable products, many of which were decades ahead of their time.

A Green New Deal in Coventry?
Organised by a local group of activists and councillors, the afternoon’s meeting was designed to complement the morning session by discussing what a Green New Deal might look like in Coventry. Experienced facilitator and Coventry North West Labour Party constituency chair Chris Jones introduced the participatory workshop, which was very well attended. The room was organised into six key topics of the Decarbonisation and Industrial Strategy Bill – a cross party legislative program proposed to Parliament by the Green Party’s Caroline Lucas and Labour’s Clive Lewis in March this year, which is to be reintroduced after the coming general election.

Food and Farming
An important topic for the first group was how research and education could address issues surrounding sustainable food production and consumption through research and education. The group pointed to the work of Coventry University’s Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, which recently took over land at Ryton from Garden Organic, another local organisation promoting sustainable and organic food production. Through campaigning, advice, community work and research, their aim is to get everyone growing ‘the organic way’. Thinking a generation ahead was also important for this group, which pointed to the role of schools and community groups in teaching future generations about local farming and procurement and also how take responsibility for food waste (through composting, for example) and shopping habits (shopping more locally). Food poverty was another important issue, and the group suggested that local businesses, especially chains like Las Iguanas, could be incentivised by the local Council to redistribute unused food to people that need it in the local community.

Energy
The second group discussed how to update old buildings in the city through planning, regulation and incentivisation, helping people to make their homes and businesses energy efficient through insulation and self-sufficient through the installation of solar panels. Transport was also an important area for decarbonisation, the group argued, with clean public transport and electric car sharing two immediate ways that would reduce our impact on the environment. The group also discussed how to get more people on their bicycles, as cycling was not only good for the environment but also a good way of keeping healthy. The council could monitor current bicycle use and collect data to think about how to encourage more people to get on their bikes in the future.
Transport
Cycling as a way to reduce emissions and encourage people to be healthy and interact with each other was strongly endorsed by the third group. One suggestion was to use city planning to make Coventry more ‘compact’, focusing housing in the city centre to reduce congestion and the need to commute, and designing the city centre in way that encourages people to walk and talk. Another suggestion that was supported by many in the room was taking public transport back into public ownership. Bus routes, for example, could then connect areas of the city and beyond based on social need rather than on profitability. To find out what routes people wanted and needed, the group proposed a city-wide survey, available online for young people and students, and also offline at bus stops for those perhaps less confident or not using the internet.

Social Justice
Housing was a major focus for the fourth group. To make sure everyone in Coventry has access to affordable, carbon neutral housing, this group suggested the Council could introduce rent controls, and people could form tenants’ unions – a way of organising against unscrupulous landlords that has seen success in Bristol, Glasgow and London. There was also a related, passionate discussion about who was buying houses in the UK, and with 2% of land in the country taken up by golf courses versus 1% for housing, the group suggested the government take the former into public ownership, beginning with Donald Trump’s gold course in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Pay and working conditions were also an important aspect of social justice, and the group urged all Councils to become accredited Living Wage employers – requiring contractors also to provide the living wage for their employees – and work with recognised trade unions like Unison.

Education
The fifth group chose to concentrate entirely on education. We should start young with educating people about climate change, the group argued, going into primary schools and making sure that the climate emergency was a key focus of the national schools curriculum. Also, lifelong learning was very important, the group maintained. Adult and higher education should lead to well-paid permanent jobs, with career paths focused on the million new, good environmental jobs promised as part of the Green New Deal. Those working in schools could also focus on ‘quick wins’, the group suggested, for example campaigning for healthier, vegetarian meals in schools.

International Solidarity
‘How can Coventry can meet its obligation to the Global South?’ asked the final group. Coventry, like all towns and cities in Britain, had a responsibility to take in more refugees that have suffered the consequences of climate change, which has largely been driven by the West. The local Council and other ‘anchor institutions’ must commit to decarbonising by 2030, the group insisted, otherwise it will be contributing to the hundreds and thousands of deaths worldwide resulting from climate change impacts such as drought, wildfires, rising sea levels and increasingly frequent extreme weather events like hurricanes and tsunamis. The two universities in the city – Coventry University and Warwick University – should use their links with academics and students in the Global South to facilitate free transfers of green technology and support a global just transition, the group also said.

How should we organise?
After the six groups reported on what they had discussed to the whole room, participants considered how these ideas could be taken forward by a Green New Deal movement in Coventry. A suggestion that garnered wide-spread support from participants was organising into working groups based on topics of shared interest such as those identified by the Lucas-Lewis Decarbonisation Bill. These working groups could then work autonomously and set up their own channels and methods of communication to pursue local Green New Deal planning in a way that was perhaps more
inclusive than always meeting in a large, centralised group.

However, it was also pointed out that, as the Green New Deal is a holistic project, it was still important to have some form of central organisation and that these working groups reported back to the larger group regularly. One proposal that was supported by others was the formation of a steering group to look after the day to day business of running a Green New Deal movement in the city. David Ridley asked for others to help with these tasks, and said he would send an invite in due course for others to join himself and the co-founders in such a steering group which would meet regularly, perhaps twice a once or twice a month, communicating them more widely with the mailing list via email. David also agreed in response to a suggestion that he would create a DropBox account for the group where photos of the posters created during the workshop and sign up sheets for working groups with contact details could be populated, as desired.

What’s next?

David Ridley, who could perhaps be described as the Coventry Green New Deal ‘convenor’ for the time being, suggested that the next meeting could be another workshop focused on ‘democratic planning’ with Hilary Wainwright as facilitator. Hilary was involved in the Lucas Plan, mentioned by Coventry TUC president Jane Nellist in the morning session, and also in the Greater London Council’s Popular Planning Unit under Ken Livingstone in the 1980s. Hilary has agreed to come to Coventry and is very supportive of the idea of a ‘people’s plan’ for a Green New Deal in Coventry, suggesting that such a meeting could happen in January or early February.

In the 1970s, Lucas Aerospace shop stewards produced an Alternative Corporate Plan for the company that advocated the production of social useful instead of mil-
itary products. In response to the threat of job cuts, the shop stewards circulated questionnaires to the workforce requesting product suggestions which answered a social need and could be produced using the workforce's existing skills and plant technology. Emphasis was also to be put on the way the products were to be made, making sure that workers were not to be deskilled in the process of producing them. 150 product ideas were put forward by the workforce. From them, products were selected to fall into six categories: medical equipment, transport vehicles, improved braking systems, energy conservation, oceanics, and telechiric machines. Specific proposals included, in terms of transport, a new hybrid power pack for motor vehicles and road-rail vehicles. Later, the Combine produced a road-rail bus, which toured the country. In the energy sector, proposals included the development of heat pumps, solar technology, wind turbines and fuel cell technology.

In the 1980s, Ken Livingstone campaigned against the creation of a new airport at the London Docklands, intending instead that the docks should become a transport hub with the associated processing industries. In her role within the GLC's Popular Planning Unit, Hilary was a key supporter of local organisations within the docklands who were developing an alternative to the proposed airport, called The People's Plan. The result of the People's Plan movement was a 40-page document, which provided a detailed alternative plan for future of the docklands. The plan covered housing requirements, the introduction of a transport interchange, utilising the docks for cargo handling and ship repair, and employment opportunities for women. The movement triggered a public inquiry into the proposed city airport, to which the People's Plan presented alternatives. The overall aim of the People's Plan was to stop the airport and subsequently ensure that it, or at least development ideas from it, became part of Newham Council's Local Plan for the area.

Meanwhile, a group closely related and supportive of the Coventry Green New Deal plan is also organising an important event in February. LEAP – local economies after Preston – are asking on Saturday 29 February, 12.30 - 4pm, at the Warwick Road United Reformed Church: 'Is it time for a 'Coventry Model'? 'In cities and towns across Britain, local authorities are adopting new economic strategies to in-source services and democratise ownership, increase wages, enhance working conditions, and invigorate participation in economic decision-making,' the group explain. Preston, a post-industrial town suffering from underinvestment and the impact of austerity, now named Britain's 'most improved', with above-average improvements for health, transport, work-life balance, and youth and adult skills, provides inspiration for towns and cities across the country.'

Confirmed speakers for the meeting: Cllr Matthew Brown, leader of Preston City Council, driving force behind the 'Preston model'; Beth Pilgrim, CEO and co-founder, Supply Change – a company that has been recognised as one of Natwest's top 100 social enterprises in 2019 and featured in The Times and Pioneers Post. Sarah McKinley/Joe Guinan from the Democracy Collaborative – an international institution dedicated to developing strategies for a more democratic economy; and Mandy Bygrave, chair of the Coventry and Warwickshire CDA, a coalition that is seeking to bring funding to Coventry to support social enterprise. If you would like to join LEAP for an afternoon of discussion and debate about the successes of the Preston Model, the potential benefits of 'community wealth building' in Coventry and the opportunities and obstacles in getting there, sign up here: https://tinyurl.com/y5oxnhtj