

# Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's “Just Society”: Palliatives that will never be implemented

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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the representative for New York’s 14th Congressional District, recently announced a suite of five bills and one resolution that she collectively presents as the basis for establishing a “Just Society.” Cortez, widely referred to as AOC, says the legislative package will combat “the greatest threats to our country, our democracy and our planet: economic inequality and climate change.”

There is only limited information on the specifics of the five bills—the Recognizing Poverty Act, Place to Prosper Act, Embrace Act, Mercy in Reentry Act and Uplift Our Workers Act—none of which have been formally introduced in the US House of Representatives.

Most of what is known thus far about the bills comes from a six-minute video on the website *Nowthis* and a brief statement from the congresswoman in which she describes the legislation as building upon “the most transformative programs of the last century.”

“From the New Deal to the Great Society,” she states, “we have shown time and again that our nation is capable of implementing big ideas and bold solutions that match the scale of the challenges we face. We must once again recognize the breadth and consequences of poverty in this country and work together to ensure a path forward to economic freedom for everyone.”

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Ocasio-Cortez says that “with our Just Society package, we’re not simply addressing poverty or wages. We’re addressing some of the basic structural reasons that are resulting in those outcomes.”

With such sweeping claims about addressing the root causes of poverty and ensuring “economic freedom for everyone,” one would expect legislation on a scale never before seen: a massive jobs program; trillions allocated to infrastructure, health care and education; a radical redistribution of money from the military to social programs; strict government control or even public ownership of major industries and banks.

Such proposals from a prominent Democratic politician would undoubtedly prompt a sharp and hostile response from Wall Street investors and corporate CEOs, as well as their representatives in government and the media, who have grown immensely wealthy at the expense of the working class. All the forces of the American bourgeoisie would be mobilized to defeat such a challenge.

The “Just Society” bills, however, have provoked no such response. The legislative initiative has generally been met in the media with a collective yawn.

## The political content of AOC’s “Just Society”

One of the most striking features of the “Just Society” is the minimal expenditure it entails. Most of the proposals involve tweaks and adjustments to existing laws, the strengthening of federal “accountability,” and appeals to the government to do better by workers.

\* The Recognizing Poverty Act, directed to the Department of Health and Human Services, would raise the federal poverty line, thereby

increasing the number of people who qualify for existing health and welfare programs.

\* The A Place to Prosper Act would impose a national cap of 3 percent on rent increases and “begin” to “pursue penalties on abusive and predatory landlords.”

\* The Embrace Act would make social welfare programs available to people regardless of immigration status.

\* The Mercy in Reentry Act would end the restrictions on benefits for people formerly convicted of a crime.

\* The Uplift Our Workers Act would direct the Department of Labor, in collaboration with the Office of Management and Budget, to create a “worker friendly score” for federal contractors. As AOC explains in her *Nowthis* video, “We then direct the federal government to prefer doing business with worker friendly contractors.”

\* The resolution included in the “Just Society” package urges the Senate to ratify a UN covenant on economic, social and cultural rights.

What is the actual substance of these proposals? The Uplift Our Workers Act, for example, would establish a “worker friendly score” (presumably formulated by the same bribed regulators and politicians who jockey for positions with the very corporations they are supposed to be regulating) on the basis of the following factors: whether the company has broken labor laws in the past, whether it guarantees 12 weeks maternity leave, whether the company can guarantee that its workers won’t work more than 40 hours a week to fulfill the contract, and whether the firm pays overtime to those who do. Businesses that support unionization get bonus points.

Putting aside for a moment the fact that many of the guidelines that contribute to the score simply entail following already existing law, the legislation would not require the federal government to *actually do anything* in relation to the “worker friendly score.” The language here, as in each of the bills, is passive: it will “direct” the government to “prefer” to do business with higher-scored companies and consider the score to be “just as important” as the cost of the contract.

None of the bills in any way challenges the basic interests of the ruling class or significantly impacts the grotesque levels of social inequality in the US. They do not touch on private ownership of the means of production—the banks, industries, technology, natural resources—which is the economic basis for the exploitation of the working class and the political domination of the corporate-financial oligarchy. They stay as far away as possible from addressing the real root cause of poverty—the capitalist system itself.

Furthermore, as Ocasio-Cortez is well aware, most of her proposals are highly unlikely to win the support of the right-wing Democratic Party leadership, let alone secure the votes needed to win passage in the House and Senate and obtain the signature of the president. They collectively mark a retreat even from her earlier non-binding resolution calling for a “Green New Deal.”

Despite her demagogic and moralistic invocations, Ocasio-Cortez is

well aware of the limitations of her “Just Society” initiative. In an interview with National Public Radio she explains that what she hopes to accomplish with the bills is to “build popular support in acknowledging how bad the problem already is.” In reference to the first bill aimed at reassessing the poverty level, she adds, “If we can acknowledge how many Americans are actually in poverty, I think that we can start to address some of the more systemic issues in our economy.”

Is it really an “awareness” question? It is hardly a controversial statement to say that the official poverty line vastly underestimates the real level of poverty in the US. There is no need to “build popular support in acknowledging how bad the problem already is” in the working class. Tens of millions of workers and youth live with poverty and economic insecurity every day.

The scale of the crisis is staggering:

- \* The two richest people—Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates—possess almost the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the entire population.

- \* The typical CEO of a large firm makes in a single day almost as much as the typical worker earns in an entire year.

- \* The richest 5 percent of the population owns 67 percent of the wealth. The poorest 60 percent of the population owns 1 percent of the wealth.

- \* The wealthiest Americans live on average 20 years longer than the poorest Americans.

- \* Seventy percent of Americans have less than \$1,000 in savings. Nearly half of young people have nothing saved at all.

- \* Banks have foreclosed on over 7 million homes since 2004 and there are 554,000 homeless people on a given night.

- \* Military spending accounts for over half of discretionary spending—10 times more than federal housing spending and nine times more than education spending.

To speak of creating “awareness” of poverty and inequality in the face of these statistics is absurd. Only the most politically naive would believe that lawmakers in Washington are simply not aware of the conditions facing workers.

Quite the contrary, these conditions were consciously created through the policies enacted by them, Democrats and Republicans alike. Perhaps the most significant legacy of the most recent Democratic administration, that of Barack Obama, is the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in the history of the country.

Ocasio-Cortez’s “radical” plan is to appeal to the architects and beneficiaries of the impoverishment of the working class to make the most minimal changes, in order to provide a fig leaf for capitalism and divert workers from a struggle against it.

### **The “Just Society” and the myth of a golden age of capitalism**

One of the standard tactics employed by AOC, and Bernie Sanders before her, is to invoke Lyndon Johnson’s 1960s “Great Society” and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1930s “New Deal” as the historic precedents for her proposals. She and other so-called “progressive” Democrats exploit the lack of historical knowledge within the population to use these past reforms to sell their reformist nostrums to the public.

An objective review of the historical era in question is revealing in two ways. First, a comparison of Ocasio-Cortez’s “Just Society” with FDR’s “New Deal” and Johnson’s “Great Society” highlights the vast rightward movement of the Democratic Party over the last half-century. Second, it reveals that despite the supposed “great achievements” of previous eras, all of the ills of the capitalist system persist and grow more pernicious.

On May 22, 1964, when President Johnson gave his speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan unveiling his plan for the “Great Society,” he was responding, like FDR before him, to a rising tide of working class struggle. Starting in the 1930s and continuing in the aftermath of World War II, American capitalism was rocked by a wave of strikes. In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement activated millions of workers

and youth, white as well as black, in opposition to Jim Crow segregation and racial discrimination.

At this time, workers looked to the trade unions, despite their pro-capitalist leadership, to defend their social interests, and the increasingly militant stand taken by workers compelled the ruling class to grant significant concessions, starting with Roosevelt’s “New Deal.” In the 1930s Roosevelt rolled out plans for dozens of federal programs, including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the Social Security Administration (SSA).

Likewise, in the months following Johnson’s “Great Society” speech, in which he pledged to end poverty “in our time,” 87 bills were submitted to the 89th Congress and Johnson signed 84 into law. It was during these years that programs such as Medicare and Social Security were enacted. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created an Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to oversee a variety of community-based antipoverty programs. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Dozens of federal assistance programs were put into place, such as Head Start, rental subsidies and federal aid to education.

However, neither the New Deal nor the Great Society fundamentally altered the structure of American society or attacked the basic property interests of the capitalist ruling class. Roosevelt never nationalized the banks or basic industry. And the American political system never came close to carrying out the “Economic Bill of Rights” of which he spoke in his final State of the Union address in 1944.

As for Johnson’s “Great Society” and “War on Poverty,” the measures he introduced, including the government-run health insurance program for seniors, Medicare, were seen at the time, even by the left wing of the Democratic Party, as a retreat from earlier commitments to government-provided health care for all and full employment. Johnson actually cut the top income tax rate from 91 percent to 70 percent and reduced corporate taxes as well.

Poverty and inequality, while reduced, remained endemic. The US never established the type of welfare state that was established in Western Europe, where there were mass Social-Democratic and Communist parties, primarily because the AFL-CIO enforced the political subordination of the American working class to the Democratic Party.

That being said, AOC’s “Just Society” proposals are far less substantial than the limited reforms enacted during American capitalism’s relatively brief period of social reform.

Moreover, virtually all of the social gains from the New Deal and Great Society have been destroyed over the past four decades, which have seen a social counterrevolution carried out on a bipartisan basis by both big business parties. And the assault has been intensified since the Wall Street crash of 2008.

The reforms that were enacted were extracted from a violently resistant ruling class by the militant struggles of the working class, bolstered by the fear of the capitalists that American workers might follow the example of their Russian counterparts, whose socialist revolution was only 16 years old when Roosevelt was first elected in the depths of the Great Depression, and less than 50 years removed when Johnson made his Great Society speech.

The ongoing social counterrevolution in the US—part of an international offensive against the working class in every country—is not simply the product of the ruling class’ subjective greed, which, of course, exists in abundance. It is rooted in the objective decline in the world economic position of the United States. When Roosevelt was enacting his New Deal, Leon Trotsky could write about American capitalism’s “vast reserves,” which provided the US ruling class with the luxury of modest social reforms as a means of containing the class struggle.

Those reserves have long since eroded. Since the time of Lyndon Johnson, whose administration coincided with the final period of US global economic hegemony, the United States' industrial base has been vastly reduced and American capitalism has lost its dominance of world markets. The change in the world position of US capitalism was bound to be reflected in a restructuring of class relations within the borders of the United States.

There is no basis for serious social reforms within the framework of capitalism today. What is being prepared is not a new "New Deal," but the expansion of the "gig economy," in which workers are reduced to part-time employment, at-will industrial slaves. This social nightmare is to be maintained by a police state in which social opposition can be ruthlessly put down.

#### **A socialist response to inequality**

In response to the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment in the US and around the world, the ruling class has been compelled to promote its own state-sanctioned "socialists" such as Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez. Their function is to contain social opposition and block the working class from moving as an independent and revolutionary force.

Their "radical" ideas pose no threat to the capitalist system. The abysmal political and intellectual level of the reformist figures being promoted in this period is a reflection of the degradation of the entire ruling class. Marx wrote in Volume One of *Capital*: "On the level plain, simple mounds look like hills; and the imbecile flatness of the present bourgeoisie is to be measured by the altitude of its great intellects."

The elevation of Ocasio-Cortez is aimed at giving a left gloss to a party that is moving sharply to the right. Like Sanders, she has nothing to do with genuine socialism.

The past century has definitively demonstrated that the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in the US and one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world, cannot be shifted or transformed. Whether or not its representatives use "left" phrases, the Democrats serve the corporations and the rich.

For workers to secure their social rights they must organize themselves independently of the two bourgeois parties and all of the pseudo-left organizations, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, that promote the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

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