

CLIMATE

Youthful Sunrise Movement wants to give Biden a hard time

Kylie Mohr, E&E News reporter • Published: Friday, January 22, 2021



Activists with the Sunrise Movement in Boise, Idaho, and XR Boise Youth demonstrated yesterday urging President Biden to help pass the Green New Deal. @SunriseBoise/Twitter

Facing a president more favorable to their climate and social justice agenda, chapters of the Sunrise Movement across the West are getting energized for a chance to turn their protests into policies.

"The incoming federal administration is amenable to change," said organizer Isabel Shaida, 27, in Bozeman, Mont. "We can actually fight them. We couldn't fight the Trump administration."

The group is hopeful but remains adversarial with the new administration: Members led a protest outside Sen. Chuck Schumer's tony New York City co-op building on Saturday, days before Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Democrats took control of the Senate and President Biden swore his oath of office.

"There will be no honeymoon. No compromises, no excuses" for new leadership, the organization [wrote](#) on Instagram.

But hubs in smaller, more rural states are also grappling with their political realities on the ground. At least one group in Missoula, Mont., canceled its planned event due to fears of white supremacist militia groups and potential violence concurrent with Inauguration Day and the days immediately after.

"While our plan was never to counterprotest anyone else, we were really concerned it could be perceived that way," said member Maggie Bornstein, 21. "Our whole point is trying to make the world a safer, more equitable place for folks. We wouldn't want to invite people into a situation where we can't adequately give them the full picture of what it could be or have it get out of our control."

Bornstein said the deplatforming of President Trump and various groups into deeper corners of the internet made it hard for the youth climate movement to track potential threats.

The new concerns came just as the national Sunrise Movement organized a "day of action" across the country yesterday to mark the next phase in the youth climate movement that supports "the decade of the Green New Deal."

Rallies, marches and gatherings at Congress members' offices and homes occurred throughout the nation. An event map showed 30 events, though some were virtual due to the coronavirus pandemic, and others may not be listed.

A small banner drop occurred at the Boise, Idaho, train depot Wednesday. Organizer Aaron Stigile, 17, kept details under wraps ahead of time for similar reasons to the Missoula group's.

"The Green New Deal, defunding the police — in Idaho, those are not necessarily popular things," he said.

Shaida spoke of organizing challenges in Montana, a state that's traditionally seen as "purple" but went deep red in 2020, with the Republican Party winning every statewide down-ballot race.

"We've had a lot of internal conversation in the last two months," she said. "What are we doing now; how are we orienting ourselves; what do we fight for, given the place we live in? Are we always fighting a losing battle, or are there things we can campaign on that we can actually win? How do we use the national narrative of Sunrise but maybe tweak it to be something functional for us?"

Leaders in Jackson, Wyo., said they want to be cognizant of "growing at the speed of trust."

"While nationally we would maybe love to be doing some more radical events and doing more of that moral protest, I think we are really trying to be thoughtful and go a little slower and not alienate those struggling working in extractive industries," said Miles Yazzolino, 27.

Organizers said they were pleased with Biden's mention of "a climate in crisis" and his statement that "a cry for survival comes from the planet itself" during his inauguration speech. They also like that climate is listed second among [immediate priorities](#) for Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 20).

They see their role interfacing with a new administration as holding the president accountable for existing promises and pushing him further to the left on bold, decisive climate action. The national movement's goals are "building an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives in our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and well-being of all people."

To an organizer in Salt Lake City, that means "pressuring Biden to live up to what he's saying, go more in-depth about combating the climate crisis and including some social reform, as well," said Cristina Chirvasa, 19.

Chirvasa is a member of one of Utah's three "hubs"; a rally took place in downtown Salt Lake City yesterday.

There are more than 400 regional hubs. That includes about 80 in the West, a region seeing some of the most devastating impacts of climate change today firsthand, like wildfire smoke that recent studies found produced half of air pollution in that part of the country ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 12).

Hubs with the most membership include New York City, San Francisco's Bay Area and Portland, Ore.

Groups in Utah, Montana, Idaho and Wyoming all said their active members average about 10 per hub. The movement has a stronghold on bigger coastal cities, and other hubs crop up in liberal towns where there are often universities.

In Missoula, Bornstein said passing the Green New Deal and moving Biden on a climate plan are her hub's policy priorities, as well as abolishing hydraulic fracturing in the longer term.

After Biden's announcement that he would pull permits for the Keystone XL pipeline, which cuts through the northeastern corner of the state, she's hopeful more pipeline plans will follow suit ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 20).

In Boise, Stigile said his Sunrise hub is excited to "have the opportunity to be able to really push for big policy change on a federal level instead of playing defense." He noted that while the Sunrise Movement supported Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) in the Democratic primary, it believes Biden can be pressured into supporting similar causes.

"We will support him, and we will push him to do more," Stigile said.

In Wyoming, Yazzolino said Sunrise plans to focus on renewable energy — the state has space for proposed wind farms, but there's also legislation that could effectively kill rooftop solar — and include more Indigenous voices.

"I think we are all pretty hopeful that more just transition work is going to be possible," he said.

While many Western hubs said their focus includes recruiting new members, partnering with other climate groups to increase numbers, building a base and figuring out ways to keep up organizational energy at a time when the pandemic is hampering in-person sit-ins and marches, organizers have lofty aspirations and want the Biden administration to live up to its promises on climate.

"We're shifting from trying to get people to believe we need to do something about climate change to having an administration that realizes it's an issue," Chirvasa said. "Now it's making sure they understand the changes we need to make are drastic and not just superficial."

Organizers pointed to Cabinet appointments like Gina McCarthy to be the first White House national climate adviser and Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) to be the secretary of the Interior as optimistic signs for their cause.

"We want to hold the office accountable and make sure action doesn't get derailed based on its historic nature," Bornstein said. "Racial justice is at the forefront of what Sunrise wants to accomplish through climate justice."

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