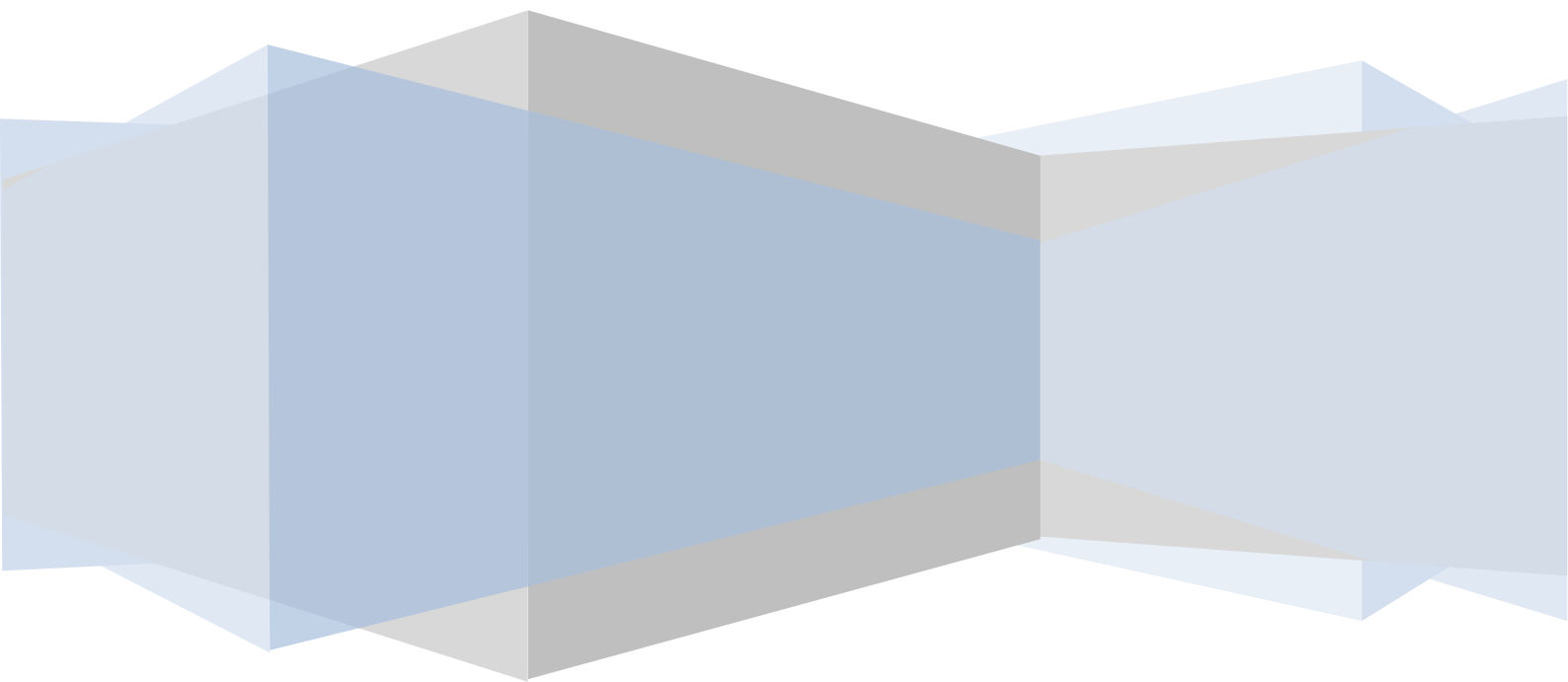


Class Struggle and Ecology

An ecosocialist contribution to the discussion on revolutionary regroupment



....we with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and... all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage of all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.

Friedrich Engels

Ecology as crucial as imperialism

For socialists in the 20th century imperialism was the great dividing line between those who accepted the logic of capitalist society and those who were willing to challenge it. In the first decades of the 21st century it is apparent that imperialism and war will remain inherent features of late capitalism. To these threats we must add the genuine and serious risks of severe ecological degradation and climate change caused by the capitalist economic model as factors that will shape socialist politics in the coming decades.

The Biosphere and us

Humanity exists in an enclosed finite biosphere from which we draw everything we need to stay alive. We can define the biosphere as our planet's ecological system which includes not just us but all other living organisms and their interaction with the lithosphere, the hydrosphere and the atmosphere.

Underpinning the Marxist view of the world is the idea that human beings take from nature – or the biosphere - the things that we transform through labour power to give us what we need and want. By doing so we are also creating our own relationship with nature. If you drive anywhere in Britain you will see that the landscape has been modified beyond all recognition from its original forest covering by agriculture and urbanisation. A more extreme example is the Mediterranean basin. The agriculture of the area transformed it from fertile farmland in the Classical Period into a region which is now arid and deforested.

How does capitalism destroy the environment?

Capitalism's dominant goal is the maximisation of profit. Capitalists must exploit people and the environment to this end. This form of economic growth requires vast amounts of energy and raw materials every day and these have to be extracted from the biosphere. The ecological costs do not figure on the balance sheet even though 50-75% of all physical inputs into manufacturing end up as waste within one year. But while capital seeks infinite expansion this is self-evidently a contradiction within an environment that is finite. The scale of this transformation of raw materials and energy is now rivalling natural processes. Our species is adding carbon to the atmosphere at a rate equivalent to at least 7% of the natural exchange between the atmosphere and the ocean. This is a process that can only increase under capitalism and it is simply beyond debate that carbon dioxide and methane trap heat and so

cause the planet to warm. Global industrial production increased at an average rate of 3% annually between 1970 and 1990. At this rate world industry doubles in size every 25 years, by a factor of 16 in a century and 250 fold in two centuries. All the materials and energy for this expansion come from the biosphere. For capitalism this is necessary if more commodities are to be produced and more profits made. Yet it is clear that the planet cannot submit to many more doublings of productivity and increases in greenhouse gas emissions without succumbing to an environmental catastrophe.

Much of what is produced under capitalism is unnecessary for a fulfilling human existence and in many cases actively detrimental to the environment. Cars are an obvious example but the high streets are full of shops selling disposable clothes shipped from the far side of the world. This pattern of consumption is encouraged by a massive advertising industry which sets out to create false needs in people. According to John Bellamy Foster 60% more money was spent on advertising than on education in the United States in 1992. This expenditure shapes mass consciousness in a very profound way but the essential problem is the manner in which commodities are produced rather than the way in which they are consumed. The phone or soft drink manufacturer that told its customers not to buy their product unless they absolutely need it would quickly find itself out of business. The manufacturer in capitalism has to make a profit rather than meet a need or take into account the irrationality of a system based on waste and exploitation.

The science is beyond doubt

The Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change drove the final nail into the coffin of climate change scepticism with its 2007 4th Assessment report. It confirmed what environmentalists had been saying for years in terms that left no doubt:

“Eleven of the last twelve years (1995-2006) rank among the twelve warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperature (since 1850).”

“The temperature increase is widespread over the globe and is greater at higher northern latitudes. Average Arctic temperatures have increased at almost twice the global average rate in the past 100 years. Land regions have warmed faster than the oceans”

“Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the most important anthropogenic GHG (greenhouse gas). Its annual emissions have grown between 1970 and 2004 by about 80%, from 21 to 38 gigatonnes (Gt), and represented 77% of total anthropogenic GHG emissions in 2004.”

“Changes in the atmospheric concentrations of GHGs and aerosols, land cover and solar radiation alter the energy balance of the climate system and are drivers of climate change.”

The IPPC recommends stabilising the emissions of CO₂ at 450 parts for every millions parts of atmosphere (ppm) and says that 550ppm gives a 77-99% chance of a 2° global temperature rise or worse. On the basis that the latter figure would cost

1% of global GNP to implement this is what was proposed by the Stern Report which was the most authoritative capitalist attempt to come to terms with the problem. Stern made a hard calculation between what he thought industry and governments would be willing to pay and the human cost.

As one would expect from a business orientated solution it will be left to the world's poor to pick up the bill. The scientific evidence makes it plain that climate change, caused by human activity is likely to result in sudden and dramatic changes to some of the major geophysical elements of the Earth if global average temperatures continue to rise as a result of the predicted increase in emissions of man-made greenhouse gases and that this is irreversible on a human timescale.

There is a sliding scale of damage that is caused by each rise in global temperature above pre-industrial levels. An increase of 2.5° will result in the extinction of 25-30% of species rising to 40-70% at 3.5°. Water shortages will become chronic for up to 4.4 billion people and crop yields will drop concomitantly. As the earth heats sea levels may rise by up to 7 metres displacing hundreds of millions of people in the world's cities.

There are nine major elements of the biosphere that could potentially change abruptly once they pass a certain threshold of change.

- Arctic sea ice: some scientists believe that the tipping point for the total loss of summer sea ice is imminent.
- Greenland ice sheet: total melting could take 300 years or more but the tipping point that could see irreversible change might occur within 50 years.
- West Antarctic ice sheet: scientists believe it could unexpectedly collapse if it slips into the sea at its warming edges.
- Gulf Stream: few scientists believe it could be switched off completely this century but its collapse is a possibility.
- El Niño: the southern Pacific current may be affected by warmer seas, resulting in far-reaching climate change.
- Indian monsoon: relies on temperature difference between land and sea, which could be tipped off-balance by pollutants that cause localised cooling.
- West African monsoon: in the past it has changed, causing the greening of the Sahara, but in the future it could cause droughts.
- Amazon rainforest: a warmer world and further deforestation may cause a collapse of the rain supporting this ecosystem.
- Boreal forests: cold-adapted trees of Siberia and Canada are dying as temperatures rise.

In the light of current scientific opinion, the Stern Report's conclusions and the weaknesses of the solutions it proposes demonstrate just how extensive capital's influence on government is. This should come as no surprise in a world where 7 of the top 10 corporations (by sales) are either oil companies or auto manufacturers. So while not even George Bush any longer denies anthropogenic climate change he, representing the United States' ruling class, in common with most business opinion, now insists it is best addressed through voluntary measures undertaken by business, and by the development of techno-fixes, rather than by setting limits on emissions. This will not change whoever wins the presidential election. A survey in the

Independent showed that climate change is eighth in the concerns of big business in Britain. This will not be any better in any other capitalist economy because the environment is going to come at the end of a list that includes increasing sales, reducing costs, developing new products and services, competing for staff, securing growth in emerging markets, innovation and technology.

In any case every single previous advance in technology under capitalism has been used to increase production. As manufacturing costs are reduced more commodities are made, sold and scrapped so adding to the stress on the biosphere. This is not an argument in favour of arresting technological innovation but it does oblige us to consider how technological solutions are used. Increasing production under capitalism has not eliminated poverty. That is not its purpose.

Private and market solutions

Some governments, including New Labour, claim to take climate change seriously and they primarily rely on market mechanisms to solve the problem combined with a low intensity campaign to make individuals feel responsible for the global situation. Both approaches are wrong. We have already demonstrated that the logic of capitalism makes it incapable of developing a globally sustainable economy and the privatisation of individual responsibility is straightforward neo-liberalism. For example many families rely on cars because they do not have accessible to convenient cheap public transport. The destruction of the public housing stock obliges millions of people in Britain to waste a fortune every year on heating shoddily built, privately owned homes.

The focus on individual responses serves the interests of capital. It's not so much a conspiracy as a diversion, an attempt to divert our attention from those who are truly responsible for this crisis to encourage an individual response to climate change. The working class does not choose its own conditions of life.

A reliance on market mechanisms is not confined to governments and business. Many activists in the environmental movement have accepted the myth that the market can resolve this crisis. The Clinton administration wanted carbon trading, which is supported by some environmentalist, included in the watery weak Kyoto Agreement. This was at a time when industry in Eastern Europe was collapsing and US and Western European companies would be permitted to buy the "right to pollute" from states which reduced their emissions. Carbon trading is now a well established market in which hundreds of millions of dollars of profit are made to facilitate the pumping of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Other market based approaches are unacceptable to socialists. As water becomes scarcer in many parts of the world it will become unaffordable to the poor. Food prices, which are already rising sharply, will cause global malnutrition and starvation. This is one of the primary objections to bio-fuel. In richer parts of the world the greater frequency of extreme weather events will disproportionately affect the less well off and pricing mechanisms will be used to modify people's behaviour.

Planning and collective action

It is becoming increasingly clear to growing numbers of people that capitalism not only generates war, poverty and insecurity but that it also potentially threatens our survival as a species. As socialists we must explain that only by collective action will we be able to develop solutions to climate change. The key terrain for this debate in Britain is in the trade unions but traditionally trade unionists have tended to regard environmentalism as a threat to jobs, and environmentalists distrust the unions because they defend even most polluting industries. The union bureaucracy has always allowed capital free rein to direct production as long as it provided their members with jobs. Union members or leaders rarely questioned what is produced or how it is produced and while some unions are now talking of 'greening the workplace' the question of the social utility or environmental implications of what is produced are still not a subject of real discussion.

While many environmentalists have taken managerial jobs within the big corporations to "reform them from within" and others continue to advocate pro-capitalist solutions to the environmental crisis socialists and trade unionists must start thinking about developing alternative plans of production. Trade unions are not obliged to be defenders of wages and conditions within the confines of capitalism and our comrades are taking a leadership role in developing a trade union network to make the issue of climate change a campaigning priority in the organisations that represent million of workers in Britain. Our activity in the coming years must, as a central priority, aim to make the unions an enthusiastic participant in a mass movement against climate change.

We will never build a mass movement on the basis of arguing for self imposed austerity. The changes we need to make would greatly enhance the quality of life for the vast majority of us. Instead they would release millions of people from the stress of the car and traffic jam by replacing it with free public transport, by significantly shortening the working week, by socialising domestic labour. We can only solve the problem of climate change through rationally planning what we produce and how we produce it, not by clinging to the anarchy of the market.

An ecosocialist approach

An ecosocialist approach to the economy radically challenges the capitalist assertion that we always need more commodities by saying that we need enough to live comfortably. The first priority is not the creation of profit but the satisfaction of human need. As internationalists we insist that this is true on a global scale and we reject any solution which leaves a world in which:

- 2.5 billion people, nearly half of the world's population, survive on less than two dollars a day.
- Over 850 million people are chronically undernourished and three times that many frequently go hungry.
- Every hour of every day, 180 children die of hunger and 1200 die of preventable diseases.

- Over half a million women die every year from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. 99% of them are in the global south.
- Over a billion people live in vast urban slums, without sanitation, sufficient living space, or durable housing.
- 1.3 billion people have no safe water. 3 million die of water-related diseases every year.

Putting these issues at the heart of our politics helps us establish a Marxism that is both humane and ecological and which frees it from the anti-humanist, Stalinist, ecocidal distortions that the Soviet bureaucracy introduced. The internationalist and explicitly revolutionary implications of ecosocialist politics will be attractive to the radicalising new generations of activists who have shown themselves capable of impressive feats of organisation. They have no memory of the defeats suffered by the working class movement in the last three decades but equally they have not seen evidence that convinces them that the real power to change the world lies in the working class. It is part of our responsibility to demonstrate that this is so.

Our demands

The environment is already an object of intense class struggle on the international level. In some parts of the world it is taking the form of disputes over agricultural land, access to water and food supply. Our strategic objective is that the working class resolves capitalism's impending and actual ecological catastrophes in its own interest beginning with collective struggle, mass struggle, and leading, if we are successful in our struggle, to collective planning, to collective control over the resources of the planet. That is the only outcome which will enable humanity to allocate the biosphere's resources not to generating profit for the few but to the satisfaction of real human need.

As we argued in the Socialist Resistance document [Savage Capitalism](#):

ecosocialists have to start from a class analysis, an analysis that can unite the largest possible number of people to make the rich, not the poor, pay. We support the building of a mass movement, nationally and internationally to impose the types of demand below.

- For a unilateral reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in Britain of 90% by 2030, with similar reductions in other developed countries;
- For an international treaty to cap global carbon emissions, not because we think this is an easy option, or even likely to be achieved (this depends on the balance of forces), but because it is necessary and can unite the movements internationally against the failures of the capitalist system;
- For international rationing of air travel, any market in rations to be made illegal;
- Opposition to nuclear energy and the building of any new nuclear power stations;
- For a massive expansion of renewable energy;
- For subsidies from national and local government:

- to replace the use of cars by providing cheap, accessible and frequent public transport;
- to ensure all new buildings are zero-carbon;
- to provide insulation, energy conservation, etc. for all homes to make them energy efficient.
- On climate change we should campaign around the following transitional and immediate demands which are designed to halt and reverse the global warming process and thus prevent climate chaos and rising sea levels.
- These should include a 90% reduction in fossil fuel use by 2050, based on a 6% annual target, monitored by independent scrutiny. The industrialised countries, who have caused the problem, must take the lead in this. The most impoverished peoples are paying the highest price for the actions of the advanced countries. There is no point in asking them to take measures not being taken in the industrialised countries.

This means:

- Cancellation of the third-world debt. There is no point on calling on impoverished countries to tackle climate change if they are saddled with debt.
- A massive increase in investment in renewable energy including solar, wind, wave, tidal and hydro power (with the exception of destructive mega-dam projects). These should be monitored for anti-social consequences. No nuclear power.
- End the productivist throwaway society: production for use and not for profit.
- Tough action against industrial and corporate polluters.
- Free, or cheap, integrated publicly owned transport systems to provide an alternative to the car.
- Nationalisation of rail, road freight and bus companies.
- Halt airport expansion, restrict flights and end binge flying. Nationalise the airlines.
- Redesign cities to eliminate unnecessary journeys and conserve energy.
- Scrap weapons of mass destruction and use the resources for sustainable development and renewable energy.
- Massive investment to make homes more energy efficient. Moves towards the collectivisation of living spaces.
- Nationalisation of the supermarkets, localised food production and a big reduction in food miles.
- No GM crops for food or fuel.
- End the destruction of the rain forests.
- Defend the rights of climate change refugees and migrants. Protect those hit by drought, desertification, floods, crop failure and extreme weather conditions.
- Renationalise water and protect water reserves. End the pollution of the rivers and the water ways.