

Capitalism, pollution and the solution

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Over 3200 Bangladeshis lost their lives as a result of Cyclone Sidr, with another 2 million struggling for basic necessities like food, water, shelter and medicines. This is the shocking reality of climate change - it is not just a polar bear floating away on a small piece of ice in the Arctic. Climate change impacts the weather patterns across the globe causing droughts, floods, desertification, temperature increases, an increase in wild and unpredictable weather like hurricanes - which has a serious effect on human existence, especially those in more precarious places such as Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world.

Scientists are in agreement that human activity is driving climate change. Global warming stems from the increase in greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, in the atmosphere, mostly put there by the burning of fossil fuels. The problem is compounded by a positive feedback mechanism - i.e. the more greenhouse gases we pump into the atmosphere, the greater the effects and the planet heats up exponentially. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has re-evaluated its initial estimate and now says that average temperatures could rise as much as 6.4°C by the end of the century as the oceans and land become less able to absorb CO₂.

The crisis is acute and something needs to be done - some scientists estimate that there are only eight years left before the damage done becomes irreversible. But what can be done about it?

Rely on capitalism

It took an economist, Sir Nicholas Stern in his climate change review a year ago, to make big business sit up and take notice. He said the world was facing not only a potential economic disaster but also the "greatest market failure the world has ever seen".

The capitalists responded with measures designed to provide the appearance of action whilst in no way threatening their profits. This has led governments and corporations alike putting their money (literally) on carbon trading schemes like the EU Emissions Trading Scheme. The idea is to cap the level of greenhouse gas emissions and then systematically reduce the amount, so that companies or countries that are emitting less or changing to greener production methods can sell their credits to other firms/countries that are not investing in such methods.

However, the only regional emissions trading scheme faltered at the first hurdle. The EU ETS was launched in 2005 and phase one collapsed last year because the EU Commission over-allocated the emission quota. This illustrates the complexity of trying to quantify all aspects of emissions and their environmental impact.

Phase two of the ETS, which will run from 2008 - 2012, will allow for almost 80 per cent of savings to be made through offsetting. Offsets, which came in the form of Kyoto Clean Development Mechanism credits, allow carbon users to reduce their net emissions by funding an emissions-reducing project abroad - which is the way multinational firms such as HSBC can claim to be "carbon neutral". To offset emissions, people

can plant a tree in another country or pay to maintain a "carbon sink", such as a swamp, which absorbs the CO₂. The science behind quantifying the amount of trees that it would take to offset a tonne of carbon emissions is not only questionable, it is also just another way of letting big business go on with business as usual.

That is the bottom line - no capitalist government or business is ultimately going to do anything that damages their profits. That is why the intergovernmental treaties, like Kyoto and the post-Kyoto deal to be brokered in Bali this month, are not in reality binding, even for the countries that ratify the agreement. Plus how can an international solution work if the US, the world's biggest polluter per capita, refuses to ratify it and is instead setting up its own committee of the 16 world's biggest polluters that don't have to set targets that would interfere with their economic development?

In Britain, a country that is "leading" the fight against climate change, Labour's record on cutting emissions is abysmal. The UK government's targets of reducing carbon emissions by 60 per cent of 1990 levels by 2050 has been ridiculed. Brown just recently cut £300 million from the government department, DEFRA, which is supposed to be spearheading Britain's fight against climate change. The government has also announced £7.6 billion expansion plans to almost double the number of flights out of Heathrow to maintain Britain as a major aviation hub within Europe. In a follow up to the Stern report (meant to answer its environmental critics), Labour announced plans to leave international aviation out of the emission targets in this year's climate bill - so flights can continue to increase without affecting the 2050 targets.

The last paragraph shows the illogical, anarchic drive of the capitalist system. As Marxists, we understand that the root of environmental degradation lies within the capitalist system, the continued expansion of capital, accumulation of profits and the development of the productive forces, i.e. industry, on a global scale.

Green localism

Other political movements, although rejecting the free market answer to fighting climate change, look instead to reducing individual carbon footprints by promoting a local solution still within the capitalist system. Environmental activists, whether members of a Green Party or NGOs/charities like the Sierra Club or Greenpeace, believe that it is just the scale on which capitalism operates that is the fundamental problem. They say that it is big business and big capital is the root cause of the environmental crisis, and only if you could go back to a smaller capitalism, a local capitalism, then the problems would go away.

The main weakness in this theory is its failure to understand the dynamics of capitalism, the drive to competition and profits, and the relationship between capital and labour. The Greens obscure the internal dynamics of the capitalist system: the drive to competition and monopoly on one hand, which means that small firms compete, acquire each other or drive the other out of business until the most successful become larger firms; and on the other hand the exploitation of workers, which is based on who owns the means of production, allowing the accumulation of surplus value by the capitalists. So even if you are a small, local capitalist, you still own the factory and exploit workers and the environment to gain a profit.

The Greens do not see that the working class movement is the primary agent to fight climate change. Yet the working class has a vital interest in stopping capitalism laying waste to our world. Throughout its history, workers have fought to stop dangerous production methods and impose safety standards on the capitalists and on their state. Through forcing legislation on the ruling class, it has made tangible gains, helping to create a habitable environment in many cities and towns again.

The Green's strategy of localism cannot be successful in overcoming climate change, which is an international problem. Academic geographer David Harvey explains the contradiction: "Localism often

allows the command of particular places but this does not mean having the capacity to control or command the process of production; the capitalist class can shift capital, playing one locality off against another, or undermine local strategies by the exercise of political power at national or global scales of governance."

Lastly the green movement also emphasises an individualist response to environmental issues. The political slogans that the greens have contributed to the movement - "think globally, act locally", "reduce, reuse, recycle", "walk gently on the earth" - emphasise the localism and the individualism of their politics. The focus on individualist choice takes the burden of climate change off the big polluters, but without changes in their behaviour greenhouse gas emissions will continue to grow, no matter how much recycling consumers do. The focus on the individual also promotes reactionary movements like Nimby-ism (Not In My Backyard) where those individuals with more political power or money can dictate to those who do not.

Marxists believe that only the shift from the anarchic system of capitalism to a democratically planned global economy will be able to address the needs of the majority population and take into account the environment as well. In this way, we do not reject technology outright, like some of the more radical, "deep greens"; we realise that technology has been crucial to the development of society, but that there is a balance between society and nature. As Marx and Engels said: "Know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men [sic]. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist."

Bureaucratic versus democratic planning

The idea of a planned economy conjures up the environmentally destructive policies of the Eastern European, Stalinist states. What all Greens have in common is their critique of the socialist/communist movement as being only interested in the rapid growth of the productive forces, and they criticise the Stalinist states for their appalling environmental record. Chernobyl is the first argument that comes to mind.

The Chernobyl disaster proved that state ownership in itself is no guarantee of acceptable security, if it is under bureaucratic control. In the case of the Stalinist states, the drive for mass industrialisation from the bureaucracy meant that there was no democratic input. The five year plans of industrialisation did not take into account the environmental impact, only the need to fulfil the quotas of production.

But when we raise the question of a planned economy, we are fighting for a democratically planned economy, one that can take into account the totality of the environmental and social impact. Through exposing the lies of the ruling class, throwing open the company or government secrets, the masses can make well-informed democratic decisions.

Socialist solution

The first and most immediate issue is to stop the pollution that is causing climate change. The government set targets are woefully inadequate. We propose a massive and rapid shift away from fossil fuel emission to renewable energy. This means cutting our industries dependency on oil and coal burning which creates harmful CO₂.

We wouldn't pump money into expanding roads but radically improving public transport - creating workers councils to decide how best it should be run. With the information at our disposal we could make informed decisions regarding food production and distribution, etc.

And how would we pay for this? We would tax the corporations - 200 of the top companies in the UK pay next to no tax. We would also tax the rich, with a steeply progressive tax.

But no demands for a sustainable environment can be secured permanently without the seizure of political and economic control from the capitalists. Therefore in order to fight for a clean and safe environment we need to struggle for workers' control, the expropriation of capitalist corporations, construction, utilities, energy production, and transport industries, under workers' control, with no compensation to the former owners, and a democratic global plan of production. Only in this way can we eradicate the huge disparities between overcrowded cities choking in traffic congestion and a deprived, depopulated, countryside.

In reality very few of these radical demands can be realised without building a movement which mobilises mass forces internationally to fight climate change. We need more joint action, protests, mass demonstrations, including strike action by workers.

Ultimately, climate change can only be overcome if the working class advances its own program, its own revolutionary solution to the environmental questions, on an international basis. The struggle against the destruction of the natural foundations for human life, and for a rational, conscious relationship between humanity and nature, is a central question of the socialist revolution today, a central question of building a classless, communist society.

Campaign Against Climate Change

Demonstration

Saturday 8 December 2007

Assemble 12 noon

Millbank

London

(Westminster Tube)

Trade Union Conference

Saturday 9 February 2008

University of London Union

Malet St, London WC1E 7HY

Speakers: Mark Serwotka, PCS; Matt Wrack, FBU; Francis O'Grady, TUC; Christine Blower, NUT; Michael Meacher MP; Caroline Lucas MEP

Delegate fee £10

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