

How can we stop climate change?

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When George W Bush sits down at the G8 summit in Germany to talk about climate change, he won't be thinking about the environment ? he will be thinking about US firms like Exxon Mobil, Halliburton, and Citigroup. His sole objective is to protect American big business interests and their profits.

The same man who refused to sign the Kyoto Agreement (weak though it was) and questioned the validity of scientific evidence confirming climate change hasn't changed his tune, but sees the political benefits of sitting at the table paying lip service to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, such as carbon dioxide. But he is not going to agree to anything that will put American companies at a competitive disadvantage. His cronies, Blair, Merkel, Putin, Sarkozy and the rest, are all there for the same reason ? how can they position themselves so that their economies make the most money out of the global meltdown?

Under capitalism, our environment and its resources are commodities to be bought and sold. It is the drive of competition between firms, where they either cut costs and increase profits or get driven out of business, that governs the global political, economic and social relations. None can ?afford? the luxury of cleaning up their polluting productive processes; many multinationals move into an area, wreak havoc on the environment, and then pack up shop and move to another vulnerable location where they can exploit the resources and the workers.

Karl Marx, writing in the 1860s, identified the destructive nature of capitalism: ?All progress increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as a background of its development? the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth ? the soil and the worker.?

That?s not to say that individual companies are blind to the fact they can make a few quid out of ?greenwashing? their activities. Recently General Electric announced that its green business has doubled in two years to \$12 billion. The Financial Times stated that it is ?the strongest sign yet that corporate America?s drive to respond to climate change is beginning to pay off? And GE says that it is in position to meet its target of \$20 billion in ?green? sales by 2010.

Just as General Electric proclaims that ?climate change is a critical driver of new business opportunities?, Shell remarkets itself as an energy company and says it can?t make sufficient solar panels to satisfy demand, while BP has re-branded itself as ?Beyond Petroleum? and adopted a sunflower logo.

Yet renewable energy represents 1 per cent of the \$8 billion that BP spends on fuel exploration and production.

Henderson Global Investors (a ?socially responsible? investment fund manager) states that Shell and BP alone are responsible for 40 per cent of the CO2 emissions of the leading 100 companies on the FT Stock

Exchange listing and have a large appetite for electricity. BP is also at the heart of carbon trading policy formation. BP's products remain massive polluters, generating 5 per cent of the entire world's fossil fuel emissions.

But the market madness doesn't end there ? carbon trading is just one example of the way the free market acts to protect the polluter. To absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, landowners possessing large tracts of forest land (generally in poorer tropical countries) are paid not to cut their forests, while major polluters in more industrial parts of the world can purchase these credits as a means to allow them to continue to pollute.

The Thai farmer who gets carbon sequestration credits for not cutting the forest may experience a one-time windfall but no permanent enhancement of the family's standard of living; whereas the US corporate polluter buying credits contributes not only to continued pollution but to an intensified accumulation of capital.

A new sector of carbon brokers and consultancies is rapidly emerging which prospects for carbon dumps to privatise in the third world and which negotiates the price of excess carbon emissions. An ?environmental? derivatives market has already sprung up whereby ecological credits are bundled together and sold in bulk to speculative financiers banking on the increased price of already established credits. Other markets for nature credits have emerged for many ecological commodities: biodiversity credits, fishery credits, air and water pollution credits, rare bird credits and so forth.

Individualism and localism

For many people, the immensity of the environmental problem leaves them feeling powerless. Not least because they are completely excluded from the decision-making process, for instance when Labour decides to spend £5 billion on an M1 road widening project instead of putting the money into public transport that would reduce reliance on private cars; or when Bush and Blair go to war in order to secure its future oil supplies instead of investing resources in renewable sources of energy.

People who are aware of the devastating effect that climate change will have, especially on the poorest regions of the world, want to take responsibility, so they turn to what they do have control of ? their personal lifestyle ? and choose to recycle, ride their bike to work, and/or stop flying as often. And capitalist governments are quite willing to push the burden of climate change onto the populus because it takes the spotlight off governmental policy and the real polluters ? big business. In 2005, under pressure from industrial lobbyists, the Labour government torpedoed an all-party Climate Change Bill that would have increased the state's modest powers of enforcement.

The environmental movement, which includes NGO's like Greenpeace and political parties like the Green Party, also promotes a return to the individual, the local and a ?green capitalism?. 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 of their politics. However without changes in the behaviour of the big polluters greenhouse gas emissions will continue to grow, no matter how much consumers recycle.

Fundamentally the greens believe that capitalism, as a socio-economic system, works as long as it is done on a smaller scale. In this way, they 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 they become large firms; and the exploitation of workers, which is based on private property and the ownership of the means of production, allowing the accumulation of surplus value by the capitalists, on the other hand. So even if you are a small, local capitalist, you still own

the factory and make profits from another's labour.

As political strategies, both methods as end games in themselves are problematic. As individuals, we should try to do as much as we can to improve the environment in our localities by putting pressure on governmental representatives and bodies through demonstrations, lobbying and actions to fulfil their meagre promises. But to answer an environmental crisis caused by global capitalism, we need a global solution. We need to fundamentally change the way the world is organised ? politically, socially and economically. In short, we need a revolution that will overthrow the capitalist system and replace it with a democratically organised, socialist society where all the oppressed in today's society are the decision-makers of the future.

International collective action

Speaking from the top table at a conference organised by the Campaign Against Climate Change, George Marshall of the Climate Outreach and Information Network ridiculed a socialist intervention from the floor, saying that we were in 'cloud cuckoo land' if we thought that we could overthrow capitalism because 'it is an incredibly strong system that works'.

He stressed that we have only a short time frame to reverse the environmental damage already done and that revolution was just not on the cards. Instead, we should just ask a bit more nicely for changes from the powers that be.

Well for billions of people across the globe, capitalism isn't working for them. It is not providing them with clean water, a roof over their heads, food in their stomachs or basic medical care. People are dying everyday because the capitalist powers like the G8 nations are bombing their homes and infrastructure. They are dying because pharmaceutical companies worry more about shareholder profits from patents than saving lives. And through global warming capitalism is creating the conditions for mass floods, droughts, and hurricanes. So going cap in hand to the imperialist powers seems to be a dead end strategy.

We need collective action, built democratically from below but with an international, anti-capitalist, socialist strategy. We have to develop a programme that links from where we are now to where we want to be ? overthrowing capitalism ? and keep the end goal in sight.

The development of a transitional political programme, and a political party to fight for it, is crucial in bridging this gap. As a movement we should be demanding for governmental reforms that reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted ? but we need to back up our demands with collective action, such as demonstrations, occupations and strikes. We need to build up our local organisations, whether community groups, trade unions or student unions, and link up with others in different localities.

When the bosses of the polluting firms say that they can't 'afford' to change their ways, we say ? open the books. Companies across the globe, like BP, Citigroup and Wal-Mart, are announcing the biggest profits ever ? these profits should be re-invested back in cleaner technology instead of stuffing the pockets of the fat cats.

We demand dangerous polluting industries be shut down, and severe punitive penalties on repeat pollution offenders. We need to organise a massive shift away from fossil fuel burning and towards renewable energy production.

What Marshall doesn't comprehend is that revolution is not something that just plods along as you win reforms and then somehow society transforms itself gradually into something nicer. Revolution is a seismic change ? something that erupts when the majority of people say enough is enough.

Look at recent examples ? 2001 in Argentina when the people took to the streets and got rid of four capitalist governments within about a week; revolutionary upheavals in Bolivia fighting for the nationalisation of hydrocarbons; revolutionary situations in Nepal, France, Venezuela, to name just a few.

But in order for a world revolution to be successful, it needs an international revolutionary party to cohere the struggles and build a revolutionary alternative, to overthrow capitalism and create a socialist society internationally. The League for the Fifth International is working to build that party - join us in struggle.

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