

# Internationalism is the only way to achieve climate justice in Pakistan

Minerwa Tahir Sun, 20/10/2019 - 11:07

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Brightly lit advertising hoardings line the Main Boulevard of Lahore's Defence Housing Authority (DHA) area. If one drives down this boulevard in the evenings, this waste of energy is a daily spectacle. Besides being a torture for the eyes, what are these boards good for? We know what our basic necessities are. These boards don't give us any crucial information about the commodities that they advertise either, such as whether these goods are sustainable or if we even actually need them. They are designed in a way that makes us think that we need these commodities. If production was actually happening according to the needs of humanity, such advertisements would be banned and we would save the energy, avoid the scourge of power cuts and put it to better use ? for instance, putting up lights in working class districts where working women can feel safe while going out in the evenings. Will that happen under capitalism? No. Putting up lights for working women's safety would not yield profits for any capitalist. Instead, we will witness not only this waste of energy to satisfy the capitalist avarice for more and more profit, but also the ever-worsening threats to the environment including both draughts and flooding, not to speak of air pollution.

The ecological crisis is hitting different parts of the world but its severity is far worse in the semi-colonial world. Farmers carried out a week-long ?long march? to Thatta in July this year. They were protesting against the scarcity of water in their region as well as sea erosion. For the past several years, water scarcity has been a problem in the delta region of the Indus. Almost 2.5 million acres of Thatta and Badin districts are estimated to have been inundated by salt water by now and it is feared that if sea intrusion is not stopped, this will reach Thatta by 2050 and the Indus Delta will be completely submerged. According to one study, water crisis in the coastal districts of Sindh impacts local rural women on a far bigger scale. They are forced to travel by foot an average distance of two kilometres, sometimes multiple times a day, to fetch water for household needs from wells and handpumps. In a country like Pakistan, this increases women's vulnerability and exposure to sexual abuse and harassment. Furthermore, it is estimated that women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men during natural disasters. This unevenness between how disasters affect men, women and children is rooted in the patriarchal system in Pakistan. With the exception of women from a specific elite class, no Pakistani women ever get to learn to swim properly their entire lives. By contrast, even working-class men and male poor peasants will enjoy the freedom to go swimming with their friends in nearby bodies of water.

The current prime minister of Pakistan presents himself as a friend of the environment. He spoke about the climate crisis at the UN General Assembly this year. He also likes to talk a lot about his party's 10 billion trees project. What he doesn't talk about is that nine of the 17 power plants being built under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project (CPEC) are going to produce electricity by burning coal. Other than the pollution caused by CO2 emissions, mining and burning coal are also water-intensive activities. One of these 17 CPEC power projects is the Thar mine-and-plant project. Extreme heat and scarcity of water are

already characteristic features of the Thar desert region. On top of that, the type of coal in Thar is lignite (brown coal), which has poor energy efficiency and high carbon dioxide emissions. Not only will such a project impact the air quality and temperature of the already scorching region, it will also worsen the scarcity of water for the locals. And it's not just China? the Asian Development Bank is also helping fund a 600-megawatt coal-fired power plant in Jamshoro, Sindh. Currently, 60% of Pakistan's electricity comes from fossil fuel-based generation, including gas, coal and furnace oil.

At a time when those concerned about the ecological question are pushing the world to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy like solar and wind, Pakistan is building new coal-based power plants with the blessing of imperialist powers and their financial institutions. And this shows how the local ruling class is complicit with imperialist powers in creating conditions that will lead to the extinction of humanity in general but will first particularly hit the semi-colonial world. If the prime minister or any of these imperialist powers were a real friend of the environment and the Pakistani masses, comrade Baba Jan would not be languishing in jail for standing up for the rights of families displaced in Gilgit-Baltistan by climate change. A materialist understanding of the nature of the state would make us realise that the prime minister or any imperialist power can never be a friend of the people, women and sexual minorities or the environment. The bourgeois state is a true representative of the capitalist class and its primary task is not the welfare of the masses but safeguarding the prospects for profit maximisation for capitalists. Under the capitalist mode of production, the economy is profit-driven. And even though every stage of capitalism brings with it newer developments in technology, the irrational and anarchic character of capitalism makes it impossible to utilise the full potential of these technological advancements for the collective progress of humankind. Capitalism as it exists today has been building itself for almost 200 years on the basis of fossil fuels. Some of the biggest companies globally and the whole energy sector is connected to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. And this is where the role of capitalism comes in with regards to science and research. There are technologies that could be developed for ways of power generation that are better than burning of fossil fuels. But this is not done because capitalism places obstacles in utilising the full potential of these technologies for humanity's advancement.

The concept of planned obsolescence and the Phoebus Cartel are some of the known examples of the above-mentioned phenomenon. Until 1924, the average lifespan of a light bulb was around 2,500 hours. But in December 1924, a group of leading international businessmen gathered in Geneva for a meeting. Top representatives from all the major lightbulb manufacturers, including Germany's Osram, the Netherlands' Philips and the United States' General Electric, were present. The group founded the Phoebus Cartel, which was a global organisation that hatched a secret plan to increase sales of lightbulbs by bringing the average bulb's lifespan down to just 1,000 hours. This began one of the first known examples of planned obsolescence. The household lightbulb in 1924 was already technologically sophisticated: the light yield was considerable and the burning time was at least 2,500 hours. By striving for something less, the cartel systematically reversed decades of progress. The cartel also controlled all the patents that could have introduced a more energy-efficient and long-lasting lightbulb technology. This example illustrates how the needs of humanity and ecological sustainability were subordinated to the profit motive of lightbulb company owners. The whole idea behind planned obsolescence reveals how capitalism is a system that a. is based on the production of commodities, b. aims at selling as many commodities and c. then wants to speed up the consumption of commodities. Capitalism does not produce commodities to fulfil the needs of humanity. Instead, it produces solely for profit and then creates an ideology that enables the selling of these commodities. It creates this ideology of how we need to get everything and, at other times, with the help of corrupt mechanisms as planned obsolescence, forces the consumer to buy the same commodity again and again. For instance, how many of us go on to buy new phones even when we have a perfectly functioning phone?

Another example that illustrates the irrational and anarchic character of capitalist production is cars use which is one of the most commonly used commodities that contributes on a daily basis to ecological devastation. Now, it certainly would be more sensible to produce different forms of public transportation. But the car production industry would go out of business if the material conditions that forced people into buying cars were changed. Instead, car producers will push for so-called sustainable alternatives for continuing the production of cars that could be sold for profit. The car industry will always oppose building of an ecological, sustainable public transport system, which would be something that is produced actually to cater to the collective needs of humanity. This industry then also meets the needs of only specific classes of consumers. People who produce and consume expensive cars belong to the ruling and upper classes and thus have the power to change the transport system into a public and more ecological one. But a public system of transport does not benefit the individual capitalist. And this is how it becomes a cycle: because the rich buy cars, everyone who has enough money will buy a car, motorcycle, etc. As there is no viable and reliable public transport system, people are forced to make sure that they have a vehicle for individual transportation. The absence of such a public transport system thus constitutes the material conditions that encourage, or rather compel, people into buying and using ecologically harmful individual modes of transport.

Yet the epoch of neoliberal capitalism allows this the ruling classes to co-opt even the minimal gains made by social and political movements and transform them into something that can lead to further maximisation of profits. Co-optation and commodification of queer sexuality is one such example ? big companies profit off by posing as queer-friendly or by creating products aimed at queer consumption, and imperialist nations pinkwash their global crimes by embracing a homonationalist, homonormative acceptance of very specific (white, middle-class) homosexual bodies. In the context of climate movements, we have seen how western states claimed to internalise environmental costs into the balance sheets of the production of goods and services. While this was something positive and correct, the capitalist mode of production actually enabled its reversal. The capitalist solution to the burning of fossil fuels is emissions trading, which means that companies must buy certificates for CO2 emissions. The European Union has so far been the leading institution in the attempt to introduce comprehensive emissions trading. For years, however, the certificates were sold far too cheaply, which meant that they were available in abundance for the companies and groups that emit the highest amount of greenhouse gases. This allowed them to buy cheap certificates without changing anything, and sell them on to earn money. This turned emission rights into commodities that can be traded on their own exchanges. On a material, practical level, it meant that greenhouse gas emissions can continue to rise as long as capitalists can afford to pay for the emissions. If emissions trading has achieved anything, it is adding further costs onto the consumer.

But before we discuss the merits of internalising the costs of emissions, we have to question the very nature of commodity production under capitalism. For instance, is the production of commodities like cars a sensible idea to begin with? Capitalists will talk about emissions trading to factor in the environmental costs of specific commodities but no one asks if society actually needs that specific commodity. Capitalism is incapable of asking such questions because production is determined by the anarchy of the market and not by what is economically, socially and ecologically responsible.

Another important aspect of the ecological question, particularly in the Pakistani context, is the impact of export of cotton, food and agricultural products. Water scarcity is a major crisis in Pakistan. What needs water is agricultural production. So, what happens is that we grow all kinds of water-intensive crops, such as cotton, in mass quantities that leads to a drop in our groundwater levels, and then we ship it outside of the country. Pakistan then becomes the countryside in the global sense and countries that consume our exports play the role of the city. And this example illustrates at a global level how capitalism destroys the reciprocal relationship between the city and countryside. Everything goes out of the countryside and very

little comes in. In the specific case of Pakistan, what the country gets back under neoliberal capitalism is not even machinery, which would still be some kind of development. Instead, it gets only consumer products, which are not only polluting on a global level but also something that only the richer classes will consume in Pakistan. But global capitalism also leaves fewer options for semi-colonial countries like Pakistan, which are forced to export items like cotton that a country like Pakistan should not even be growing at that scale. If it stops the exports, the result would be an even bigger deficit in its balance of payments. Thus, it becomes a vicious cycle.

This vicious cycle also affects consumption in other countries in adverse ways. For instance, Germany has naturally grown apples and does not need to create the emissions that happen as a result of shipping apples from abroad. One could happily consume locally grown apples in Germany and even store them in winters. But when you go to the store, you find apples from all kinds of different countries such as Italy, Poland, etc. except Germany itself. A demand is thus created for imported apples. It is a ridiculous need that is not really needed. But the irrational and ecologically unfriendly character of capitalism warrants that needs are determined by what the consumer wants ? but what the consumer wants is actually shaped by what all is thrown onto the market.

Similarly, the existence of borders is itself a threat to the environment. Every modern nation-state raises and maintains a military for the protection of these borders. And the military is one of the worst polluters in the entire world. The footprint of the US Department of Defence is even bigger than that of any corporation: 4,127 installations spread across 19 million acres of American soil. These are well-documented facts that US military activities have polluted and poisoned drinking water bodies.

The examples quoted above reveal the incapacity of capitalism to actually address the question of climate justice. Whatever form of measures can even be afforded from within capitalism, they always stand subordinated to the profit motive. Therefore, it is only an illusion that we can attain climate justice by just switching to newer technologies for so-called sustainable development or implementing regulatory economic interventions while the capitalist economic order stands unchallenged. That is why one of the most popular slogans of the most conscious and advanced elements of British and German students striking against climate change is ?System change not climate change?. The slogan has now travelled to the most conscious elements among young Pakistani socialists, too. In the neoliberal age of imperialism, any real measures to combat ecological devastation cannot be allowed by any capitalist state as they would mean massive interventions into the private property of the imperialist bourgeoisie. In such times, the slogan ?System change not climate change? means that it is the class character of the quarters of power that needs to change.

Another important aspect of the ecological question is the inner contradictions of the imperialist epoch and globalisation in particular ? on the one hand, the character of production and exchange is international but on the other hand is the continued nation state form in which production and exchange take place. The ecological question and the main threats it poses are obviously international ones. They can only be solved on the international level. No one country on its own can solve these questions alone ? humans can forcibly carve out their artificial borders on land but they have thankfully remained incapable of separating the climates of their regions by any such demarcations. Bourgeois governments of all nation-states are already pathetic in their internal actions against the destruction of the environment, but they are even more so on the international level. The only way to move forward and take meaningful action to redress ecological devastation is an internationalist movement.

It's good that there are movements around the world such as Fridays for Future that have popularised the slogan of climate justice particularly across the western world. Similarly, it is a positive development that

Climate Action Now organised countrywide protests in Pakistan as well. These climate movements across the world have also enabled a global movement. The ecological crisis has brought together peasants, working-class and indigenous movements into an international movement. These movements bear the potential to do more than just raise awareness ? they can actually go further and install a system that doesn't just stop climate change but also brings about real climate justice. An urgent task for us if we want to materialise real climate justice is to develop a programme on environment that addresses the social question too.

It's a specific social system that has created the question of climate change and that is called capitalism. It is a system that produces commodities for the anarchy of the market. This means that it produces commodities not according to the needs of the whole society but for just those who can afford them. It's not producing on the grounds of sustainability ? it's producing for profitability. In such a system, profitability does not mean development of humankind. It rather means the creation of immense wealth for the few while undermining the reproduction of the whole of humankind as well as the sustainability of the planet. And this is why more radical demands that address this social question need to be put forward. And while we think that it is important to fight for immediate demands that we can wrench from the hands of the bourgeois class and the big landowners, we also have to have a programme that goes beyond capitalism. For that, we have to make those who are hit most by the climate crisis, such as the working class, poor peasants, women, youth, ethnic and gender minorities etc., actors of that change. The key question about this programme is: whose class interests does the programme defend. There is no emancipation of women, sexual minorities, racial and ethnic minorities, workers, poor peasants and even the environment under capitalism because all rights and actions are subordinate to the profit motive under this mode of production. This programme, therefore, has to be anti-capitalist in nature from the very outset. Writing a programme is of course a collective task . We offer some introductory proposals that we can all discuss together with regards to our perspectives and demands regarding the ecological question.

1. In semi-colonial countries like Pakistan, it would be impossible to generate from within the resources required to build an eco-friendly, sustainable transport system and to repair and to improve housing to the highest energy-efficient standards, so that society is better equipped to deal with the degree of climate change that is already inevitable. We, therefore, call for the expropriation of imperialist capital and ventures in these countries without compensation, and for complete cancellation of the semi-colonial countries' debts to the imperialist banks. This cannot be done until and unless we internationalise our movement and build cross-border connections. Action by the workers of the imperialist countries' working class is the only way to materialise the pressure on these countries. Industries there like cars that presently contribute to enormous damage to the environment can be re-oriented to building public transport and infrastructure for countries like Pakistan whilst training workers here to carry through a green industrial revolution.

2. We reject green taxes and other measures that end up forcing the working class and poor to pay for new, eco-friendly and sustainable programmes and initiatives. We want the burden to be placed on the rich and big businesses, who should be taxed to fund these initiatives. We demand an immediate end to wasteful forms of transport and replacing these forms with a good quality public transport system whose costs are covered by taxing the big capitalists and the rich.

3. Agrarian question: In the semi-colonial world, in particular, capitalist agriculture led to destruction of rain forests, desertification, pollution, destruction of species and crop varieties, monopolisation, and the destruction of fertility as a result of the short-sightedness of agrarian production under large monopolies. We call for formation of committees of poor peasants and agricultural workers to assess the impact of climate change, to discuss necessary measures to prevent collapse of food production and a reorganisation of agricultural production with the advice of scientists committed to the movement. Such

committees can become a strong force for an agrarian revolution not only to make agriculture green but to expropriate the landlords and nationalise big agricultural industries.

4. We demand the opening of the books of industrial companies to assess their profitability and their negative impact on the workers and environment. On such grounds, workers can organise both a struggle against the parasitic extraction of profits, flowing to Dubai or London, and a fight for workers' control to implement immediate measures to make factories environmentally friendly and less pollutive.

5. A democratically planned economy that makes the working class and poor peasantry the foremost agents of change is our ultimate goal so that society can produce according to the needs of humanity and safeguard the environment in real terms. And such an economy can only work on an international level. You can't have it in one country in the long run given how production and exchange are interlinked on the global scale.

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