



Save the planet from capitalist destruction

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The ecological crisis is a central question of our age. As we head into a world recession, socialists must connect the fight to defend jobs and workers' conditions with the urgent need for a global transition to an environmentally and socially sustainable system.

The following theses of the League for the Fifth International identify the capitalist system as the cause of the ecological crisis and outline how the working class can solve it.

The environmental question

1. Global warming, melting of large parts of the polar ice-caps, climate change, expansion of the deserts, urbanization and the destruction of the rain forest...
2. There can be no question that we are living through a period in which changes in the natural environment of humanity threaten the imminent destruction of the living conditions of millions, if not of the whole of humanity over a longer period of time.
3. This danger is now recognised by the whole of society. Even the most ignorant sections of the ruling classes can no longer ignore it. At the very least, they have to concede that an environmental question exists. For the first time this qualitative shift takes place not at the local or regional level but at the highest, global level in the form of climate change, along with a host of narrower, often related crises in global fish stocks, rainforest destruction, and mass extinction.
4. Even those ultimately responsible for the system, which threatens the whole of humanity with an environmental and social catastrophe, have to concede that something has to be done about it. No UN assembly, no G8 meeting, no governmental programme is complete without a claim to have prioritised the question and promises of action plans - but their results are pathetic.
5. The danger of the destruction of the natural foundations of human life has become a truly global question. Every political and social force has to put forward and, increasingly they do put forward, a programme to answer the 'environmental question?.'
6. Whole movements have developed around this issue. They started as movements and political currents of the middle strata, of the intelligentsia, larger sections of the youth in the imperialist and Stalinist states in the 1970s and '80s. In this period, they met not only the outright hostility of the bourgeoisies in the imperialist and semi-colonial world but also of the Stalinist and social-democratic and trade union bureaucrats. They also met outright denial and ignorance of the very existence of the issues they raised, even by the organisations of the far left.
7. Today, nobody can deny these dangers anymore. Environmental issues have become issues for every party. The mainstream of the former radical petit bourgeois movement has become an 'eco-reformist' or even 'eco-marketing' party, with 'green' companies manufacturing 'green' commodities.
8. Other sections of the environmental movement still advocate various forms of petty bourgeois, backward and ultimately reactionary solution based on a return to forms of small-scale commodity production and the 'de-industrialisation' of society.

9. It is an irony of history that the moment that were the Greens' biggest successes, the taking up of their issues by all parties and the whole of society, has actually revealed the utopian and bourgeois, or petit-bourgeois, character of their solutions. The demonstration of the emptiness of their answers has also revealed the incorrect understanding of the environmental question by the main currents of the green movement, including its left wing, the eco-socialists.

10. At the same time as environmental issues have become everybody's concern, the movements fighting against the effects of environmental destruction have also changed. For example, the struggles of the landless peasants, of indigenous people for land rights and against the large multi-nationals, the questions of fighting for humane conditions for the masses in the shanty towns of the mega-cities in the semi-colonies, the questions of the transport systems and energy systems in all their aspects, meant that the working class, the peasantry, the youth, the poor became active and central components of the struggles against the destruction of the human environment - but under the leadership and influence of petit-bourgeois or bourgeois forces and ideologies.

11. Such leaderships were able to dominate because of the political ignorance of the reformist bureaucracies, the social-democratic and Stalinist parties or bourgeois nationalists in the Third World. They could prevail also because of the adaptations made by the far left to 'environmentalism' as a distinct petit bourgeois ideological current.

12. This problem can only be overcome, if the working class advances its own programme, its own revolutionary solution to the environmental questions of the 21st century. 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.

13. Therefore, it is the task of revolutionaries to advance and fight for a programme of transitional demands to save the planet, a programme linking the daily struggles to the struggle for socialist revolution.

Humanity - Nature

14. The capitalist mode of production is not the first one to interfere in nature and so-called 'natural equilibriums' on a massive scale. Any notion or idea that humanity once had a 'truly harmonic' relation to nature that has been destroyed is thoroughly illusory. Human society has always interfered, and had to interfere, in nature - and nature itself has always changed.

15. Only permanent change, the movement of matter, is a real constant in natural history. All species had to, and have to, adapt to this and cope with it. However, what distinguishes humanity from any other species is that the relation between man and nature is a social one from its very beginning, a relationship mediated via social labour.

16. From the very beginning, humanity has tried to ensure the reproduction of its own existence, which necessarily involves making the conditions for survival, the satisfaction of needs, permanent and to safeguard them against the constant uncertainties and dangers of natural development (as much as this is possible).

17. Certainly, at the beginning of human development, this was all very primitive, very limited, but it set in motion a process of social development that would also develop the collective knowledge of society concerning the conditions of its natural development, of the laws of motion of nature, of its purposeful change, of technical and technological interventions in nature, which allowed for the development of humanity to a higher level on the basis of a social labour process. The development of society, of civilisations, and their reproduction, was only possible in this way.

18. But the relation between man and nature is always on the basis of a more or less limited knowledge of natural developments and their lawfulness and has led to catastrophic developments throughout human history, including the breakdown of whole civilisations.

19. All societies have interfered in nature. All societies destroyed and formed the human environment, created it, just as their own development was also determined by the concrete, local or regional environmental conditions in which they evolved.

20. With the development of class societies, the relation between man and nature was not only differentiated along regional lines, but also along class lines.

21. 'Nature', and the 'natural' environment, was never the same for the working classes, for those who fought with nature, as it was for the ruling classes who lived under safer and better 'natural' conditions and first developed a contemplative view of natural beauty.

22. On the other hand, actual knowledge about nature and natural processes was concentrated in the labouring classes, be they peasants, miners, craftsmen, and so on. At the same time, the ruling classes were forced to appropriate, to control and centralise this knowledge into their own hands (or at least certain functions of it).

Capitalism

23. With the development of bourgeois society and the capitalist mode of production, important changes took place. All previous modes of production had also massively interfered in the natural environment, had developed new techniques in agriculture, interfered in natural selection, and this had led to the extinction of whole species or promoted the development of others. What distinguished capitalism was, and is, the scale on which it intervenes. Capitalism is truly a global, a world system. It destroys the local peculiarities of previous modes of production.

24. At the same time, it also constantly revolutionises its productive basis but it does so on the basis of generalised commodity production, in an anarchic form. Therefore, the effects of capitalism on the environment are not only of a quantitative, but also qualitative character.

25. The material basis for this is the development of the productive forces - the development and combination of large scale industry and science. Large industry goes hand in hand with the industrialisation of agriculture, destroying the last resort of previous class societies. It forces the peasantry from the land to the city or turns the peasant into a rural labourer. However, by doing so, it also increases the separation of the land from the city. It develops agriculture by destroying the soil, thereby undermining the conditions for its own advance. This not only provides the means for the creation of an urban proletariat, but also develops them in a way that undermines the living conditions and the health of the workers. It does so by pushing the alienation of the producer from the means of production to its very limits.

26. Capitalist production, therefore, develops the technique and combination of the social production process by undermining the foundations of all its wealth: the earth and the labourer. However, large scale industry, the industrialisation of agriculture, the advance of science, do not only develop the problem. They also provide the basis for its solution - a rational combination of industry and science on an environmentally sustainable basis.

27. In pre-capitalist societies, the relation between town and countryside, the relation between man and nature, developed under naturally created conditions. Under capitalism, as generalised commodity production becomes dominant, production furthermore is social production, but under private appropriation. It therefore destroys not only the traditional bonds of the countryside but also their local or regional peculiarities.

28. The destruction of these bonds, also means that the creation of a rational, and conscious relation of industry and agriculture, of agrarian production and manufacturing, becomes a necessity, if one wants to avoid, or repair, the destructive effects of social production under an anarchic system based on private property.

29. Under capitalism it is impossible to create a rational, lasting relation between man and nature, a relation that could allow for a sustainable and lasting reproduction of humanity and its natural living conditions. As generalised commodity production, the success and rationality of all economic activity is measured post festum, whether or not a product finds buyer, a need on the market. Everything that does not conform to this is constantly threatened with elimination from social or natural reproduction.

30. Indeed, since capitalist production is geared towards creating surplus value, the rational decisions of the competing capitals to improve their competitiveness and profitability will necessarily clash with any rational and lasting relation to the environment.

31. For example, whilst 'lean production' reduces the cost of fixed capital for storage and thereby raises the rate of profit - one obvious effect is the increased use of transport and therefore of pollution - the costs of which have to be paid for by society.

The environmental question and the imperialist epoch

32. One of the features of capitalist production as social production is its increasing incorporation of science into production. With the development of the capitalist mode of production, science became more and more a branch of industry and even became a commodity itself. This clearly went hand in hand with the enormous leap in centralisation and concentration of capital at the end of the 19th century, the formation of modern monopoly and finance capital.

33. The opening of the imperialist epoch also meant an enormous concentration of research and development of natural science in the hands of large monopolies, foundations or in state institutions that became more and more directly geared towards the interests of the capitalist class by the imperialist state.

34. Scientific research and its results have become private property, part of business plans and business secrets. Monopolisation has not only often meant that advances were only geared towards more profit making, it also inevitably meant that advances were held back, that research was not undertaken or was suppressed where it threatened profits.

35. This reflects the increasing social character of production and, on the other hand, the fetter that private property increasingly becomes on production.

36. Under imperialism, further massive leaps in the revolutionisation of agriculture took place, turning agrarian countries into industrial ones where the farmers or peasants only constituted a minimal part of the population.

37. Massive agrarian monopolies and scientific changes also turned agriculture in the semi-colonies upside down: destroying the old forms of production, expropriating the peasants from their crops and then from their land. However, in many cases, it also meant that new farming methods destroyed the soil, leaving devastation, poverty, hunger and flight from the land.

Monopoly capital accelerates the destructive effects of capitalism

38. The very measures to improve profitability under globalisation, for example, the privatisation of former state owned energy companies, the creation of large monopoly markets in energy, water, and the transport industry, credit geared towards these, the sheer amount of fixed capital embodied in them, all mean that the ruling classes of all major capitalist states cannot allow any effective means to combat climate change or global warming, since this would mean massive interventions into the private property of the imperialist bourgeoisie, of the large finance capitals of this world.

39. Furthermore, they unavoidably also come up against another central contradiction marking the imperialist epoch and globalisation in particular - the international character of production and exchange on the one hand and the continued nation state form in which it takes place. The 'environmental question', and the main threats it poses, are obviously international ones and can only be solved on the international level.

40. Whilst the bourgeois governments of all states are already pathetic in their internal actions against the destruction of the environment, they are even more so on the international level.

41. Secondly, all the measures of the national, as well as those from the international 'community', have the character of measures of bourgeois and imperialist 'environmentalism'. They put the costs of measures onto the labouring classes and the semi-colonies. Trading with 'pollution certificates', destruction of the rainforest to grow crops for 'biofuel' (and thereby further evictions of the landless in countries like Brazil) are just perverse, but highly profitable, forms of this 'environmentalism'.

42. Eco-Taxes, calls on consumers to separate the waste which has first been produced by the large monopolies are all more or less hopeless and cynical means to make the poor pay for, and take responsibility for, repairing the damage done by the irrational character of a system humanity cannot afford much longer.

43. Today, we face the results of the capitalist production process of the last centuries and its effects on the human environment. We face dangers that threaten the future existence of humanity itself. Neo-liberal globalisation, the latest phase of imperialism, accelerates this tendency dramatically. The various measures to improve profits, to counter the tendency of the rate of profit to fall over the past decades, have all led to an enormous increase in the destructive effects of this mode of production on the natural environment of humanity. This is a necessary product of neo-liberalism, which goes hand in hand with its increased attacks on the working class, the peasants, the poor.

44. The environmental question has been a central question raised by the anti-capitalist movement from the very beginning, particularly in the semi-colonial world.

45. It has mobilised around questions of climate change, of transport, the land question, the privatisation and commodification of natural resources.

A programme to reclaim the human environment

46. Even the most modest calculations assume an increase in the average temperature on earth of between 1 and 1.5 degrees in the next 20 years. Others calculate it up to 4.5 degrees. In the last 100 years, the proportion of CO₂ in the atmosphere has increased by 20 percent. Larger and larger areas of the polar icecaps are melting, tides may shift dramatically and sea levels will rise. This will lead to enormous changes, including the flooding of whole coastal regions and large parts of some countries. It is no longer a question of whether these dramatic changes will happen - but only whether, and how, humanity can adapt to these changes and change the course of development rapidly and decisively to avoid exacerbating them further, by massively reversing emissions.

47. It would be foolish to think, that 'the market' and the capitalist class would be able to solve these questions. They have already proved that they are unable to do this. Whilst the principal means for a rational reorganisation of what Marx called the 'metabolism' between humanity and nature - large scale industry and science - are in existence, they can only become such a means if they are taken out of the hands of the ruling class, i.e. expropriated by the workers.

48. Only under a global planned economy can a system be developed that not only satisfies and develops the needs of humanity but is also self-sustaining and dynamic, that is to say, a metabolism between social production and nature that can adapt to the changes in the environment itself. The struggle for this goal must start by addressing, advancing and generalising the burning issues of the day.

49. Against the threat of global warming and in order to counter its development and prepare for its increasing impact, we fight for global and national emergency plans to reduce emissions, to reorganise energy and transport systems, but also to provide the means by which whole regions can be as well prepared as possible to survive the effects of climate change. Capitalist business and governments will not be able to develop or implement the radical measures needed, only a mass climate change movement based on the organisations and action of the working class can develop such a plan and fight to carry it out against the capitalists' resistance

50. Such plans require that the means to achieve such changes - large scale industry in energy production, agriculture, the transport system, science and the financial resources to achieve them - have to be centralised and taken out of the hands of the large monopolies.

51. Large capital is not just 'doing nothing?'. The major capitalist forces are actively advancing their own plans, which will mean further advancing the destruction of the human environment, to make a profit out of 'eco-business' or financial businesses that see opportunities for capital accumulation flowing from the on-going environmental crisis.

52. Often workers' struggles will start with the call for opening the business plans, the books and the research plans of the polluting companies. We call for the opening of these books, for the opening of research, its results, and for the abolition of business secrecy. All scientific research has to be taken out of the hands of private capital and put under workers' control. We call for an independent enquiry by the workers and climate change movements into the investment plans of the government and big business.

53. Under capitalism, science becomes a 'servant' of capital. This also means that research and development is directed to short term profit calculations. Many research projects, additional testing and proving of hypotheses, as well as 'pure science', that is, theoretical research into the foundations of science, are cut, since, for capital as a whole, they are just extra cost factors like any others.
54. Given our still very limited knowledge about the development and the laws of motion of the natural environment, the effects of our constant reshaping of it and so on, a drastic shift in the objectives of research, opening it up, generalising and exchanging results is needed, as is a massive increase in research itself.
55. We call for the expropriation without compensation of the large energy producers, of all those industries that monopolise basic goods (like water), of the large agri-businesses and the large transport companies like rail, airlines and road transport. They must be (re)nationalised under workers' control.
56. We fight for the reorganisation of the energy and transportation systems to make them as energy-efficient effective as possible. This will include a plan to phase out the reliance on fossil fuels of the current energy system. In some cases - such as brown coal - we call for an immediate halt to production.
57. We call for a plan to phase out and replace fossil fuels and nuclear energy not only for environmental reasons, but also because the limited reserves of these resources make it necessary that they be replaced by sustainable and reproducible energy resources during this century. We do not call for the immediate closure of all these plants, but for a planned closure/phasing out - the tempo of which will have to take into account the different national conditions and their relation to other social objectives (e.g. electrification of country, fighting against hunger and poverty).
58. An emergency plan's measures will not only affect the energy producers. It will also mean that the whole transport system has to be reorganised under workers' control and public ownership. We call for a dramatic shift from the individual car to effective public transportation systems. This means a huge investment and extension of them. They should be provided for free at all levels.
59. Under neo-liberal globalisation, the transport system develops in the opposite direction - a shift to planes and the maintenance of the car as the main transport system. As a part of the struggle for a rational system, we give support to struggles against the further building of 'mega' airports like Heathrow. Of course, this does not mean that we oppose the building of every airport on the globe, but it means that the working class not only can but also must be prepared to fight for a halt to projects that just add to the environmental hazards created by the ruling class.
60. But equally important is the shift of transportation in goods. Ultimately, this, like all the other problems, can only be solved in a planned economy, as part of the building of a socialist society. But it also means that we fight to force the capitalists to implement immediate beneficial measures, for example, a reduction in exhaust gases for motor vehicles, and we fight for taxation of these capitalists to pay for the damage they cause to the environment.
61. A programme on the environment must not be confined to just those sections of the capitalist class who make profits out of energy or transportation industries or those related to them. In all countries, we call for a programme of public works to introduce a more sustainable transport system, 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.
62. In the semi-colonial countries, it will often be impossible to generate the necessary resources from within the countries themselves. We 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. But we also call for the imperialist governments to be forced to provide the means necessary to build and construct housing and facilities that can meet the effects of climate change, such as the flooding of whole regions. We reject green taxes and other measures that end up forcing the working class and poor to pay for these programmes and initiatives, they should be funded by taxing the rich and big business. We call for an immediate ban on luxury, wasteful forms of transport and where necessary rationing based on need, organised under the control of the workers and users in the industry and

ultimately a workers' state.

63. The agrarian question is a central part of the environmental question, as Marx already pointed out. In the semi-colonial world, in particular, capitalist agriculture led to destruction of rain forest, desertification, pollution, destruction of species and crop varieties, monopolisation, and the destruction of fertility as result of the short sightedness of agrarian production under large monopolies.

64. Urbanisation and disastrous living conditions in mega-cities are the other side of the same process, and are accelerated by impoverishment and privatisation of basic goods (water etc.)

65. We call for (re)nationalisation and expropriation of these industries and a programme of public works for decent housing, electricity, sanitation - all paid for by taxing the rich.

66. Some industries and forms of transport will need to be massively restructured, shrunk or even closed down (eg coal mines, junk mailers) in favour of sustainable, renewable alternatives. Marxists demand that the capitalists pay for the clean-up and conversion of these industries, with retraining programmes overseen by the workers and guaranteed jobs with no loss of pay, conditions or pension for the workforce. By means of such demands we would seek to win workers in such industries to the climate change movement, while within that movement and in the course of developing an emergency plan, we would fight all instances of sectionalism that placed the interests of particular groups of workers, defending their current forms of work and industry, above the global climate emergency. We condemn the union bureaucracy when it falls in behind the greenwash of the government or employer (eg British Air Line Pilots supporting government's airport expansion plans, NUM arguing for coal expansion on the basis of currently untested carbon storage), putting loyalty to capitalism before humanity's needs.

67. In agriculture, we fight for the expropriation of the large agri-business multi-nationals and chemical industries. We fight for control over research in new fertilisation techniques and genetic modifications and a halt to their implementation without previous testing. On the other hand, we are aware that GM could be a potential improvement of productivity and agricultural development, so that we call for massive research under control of the producers, agrarian labourers (workers and peasants) and consumers. Where governments or business have undertaken unsafe tests of GM crops or planted them without such tests, we support actions taken to destroy such crops

The workers' movement must change

68. The struggle to save the planet has already awoken many working class people and peasants - be it by fighting for control of their land, against pollution, etc.

69. The environmental question also demonstrates the limits and, ultimately, the inadequacy not only of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois environmentalism, but also of 'pure trade-unionism', nationalism and reformism. Firstly, the limits of trade-unionism are clear enough. All too often, the trade union bureaucrats use narrow worker interests (for example, of workers employed in coal industries) as a means to promote ignorance about the general and long term interests of the class. This is a major means by which union bureaucracies tie these workers to 'their' capitals.

70. Secondly, bourgeois nationalism in the semi-colonies and reformism, and also a wing of the Green movement, has promised 'environmental' change via entering or forming bourgeois governments, sowing the illusion that one could implement such politics without challenging the power of the ruling class, the bourgeois state apparatus itself.

71. This meant not only that their 'reforms' were indistinguishable from those of the 'environmentalist' wing of the imperialist bourgeoisie itself but also that they used the state apparatus, that was supposed to implement their reforms, against movements fighting the destruction of their human environment (for example, the SPD/Green government in Germany or Lula against the land-occupations and protests against the latifundistas and agribusiness).

72. While we reject the bourgeois claims that corporate-engineered consumerism is natural, against the greens we insist that the majority of humanity's living standards can continue to rise in a sustainable manner through democratic economic planning and voluntary, collective forms of living in order create a harmonious relationship between nature

and humanity. State provided canteens, childcare, laundries, and more communal forms of housing and leisure could socialise the wasteful duplication of private household tasks, in the process liberating women from the 'second shift'.

73. The destructive division of town and country, the pollution and overcrowding along with unplanned sprawl, can only be reversed with democratic planning of the economy in the hands of a workers state takes hold and begins to reshape the human environment.

74. Therefore, the fight on the environmental question is closely linked to the fight for organs of self-organisation, of control, of self-defence of the working class and the peasantry. The question of the destruction of the human environment also means that a programme for an emergency plan has to be a central part of the struggle for workers' governments, the creation of working class power and for the transition to socialism by means of world revolution.

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