

The Ecological Crisis and its Consequences for Socialists

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A subject such as this must of necessity discuss some “technical” questions first, but unless the enormity of the ecological crisis that faces us is understood in its broad outline, it will be impossible to isolate the central questions and formulate an adequate response to it.

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Almost all environmental problems in the imperialist countries can be combated provided there is sufficient expenditure of resources (specifically labour time and energy). Some minor changes in behaviour and consumption patterns may be required. Examples of this type of environmental problem are water pollution by industry and agriculture, waste and sewerage disposal, acid rain, destruction of soil by poor farming techniques and of the ozone layer by CFCs etc. Indeed, it is precisely because many such problems are seen to be readily overcome that many “technocratic” ecologists fall into the trap of so-called “technological fixes”, allowing space for reformist (or even reactionary) ecological programmes. This matter will be discussed later.

Of course, this is not to suggest that capitalism is actually tackling these issues adequately or rapidly enough. Far from it: we have only to look at the response of the Thatcher regime to the depletion of the ozone layer to understand that capital has not changed its spots. Until the relation of forces on a particular environmental issue is changed, the decisive criterion will still be profits. Nonetheless, it has to be recognised that on the kinds of issues mentioned above, capitalism can probably find adequate solutions without undergoing a major restructuring or a threat to its continued rule.

There are two major instances where such technological fixes are not so easily applicable - the destruction of the environment in the neo-colonial countries - which it shall be argued requires a thoroughgoing agrarian reform (and therefore a socialist revolution), and the greenhouse effect. As will be seen, these two issues are connected. In terms of background discussion, this article will deal mainly with the latter, because there is a crying need to discuss global warming and place the issue in a socialist context.

The problem for world capitalism is that two of the main causes of the greenhouse effect arise from activities that are central to the capitalist economy - the use of fossil fuels for energy and transport. These are the main sources of the most important greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide. As every ton of fossil fuel burned will produce up to 3.7 tons of CO₂, and the gas is relatively chemically unreactive,

it cannot be got rid of by "scrubbing" exhaust gasses. It is the exhaust gasses!

The greenhouse effect is serious. The global warming that has occurred this century is already approaching half the difference between the mean temperature at the time of the last ice age and present temperatures. The changes that are occurring as a result of global warming are already frightening, and are likely to accelerate. Thus, it has just been reported (New Scientist 9/9/89) that in an area north of Greenland, the ice cap has shrunk from 6-7 metres thick to 4-5 in eleven years. As well as raising sea levels, this could have the effect of releasing vast quantities of CO₂ into the atmosphere as convection patterns in the sea are altered. A recent report (NS 15/9) indicates that the destruction of the rain forest could possibly be contributing more to global warming than has been estimated hitherto: because, as the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increases, the role of photosynthesis (conversion of CO₂ by plants into wood etc) in removing this excess increases in importance. Landscapes are changing rapidly - with retreating glaciers and general changes in weather patterns. It has just been reported that the 1980s had the 6 warmest years on record: the probability of this being the result of chance rather than a reflection of a general trend is estimated to be 1 in 50.

To the trends noted above, another phenomenon termed "positive feedback" (very much akin to the effects the late lamented Jimi Hendrix used to get with his guitar!) must be added. Examples are - that the global warming will lead to ice melting and release of trapped carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, making the greenhouse effect more severe. Methane (a worse greenhouse gas, but - so far - less of it is released into the atmosphere than of CO₂) could be released as the permafrost in Siberia and Canada melt. Higher temperatures could lead to higher rates of decay of vegetable matter increasing methane and CO₂ fluxes. Lastly, as the sea warms more slowly than the atmosphere, and is a vast reservoir of CO₂, this could also provide some positive feedback. Against these must be put the possible effects of increased photosynthesis mentioned above, provided the world's forests are preserved and expanded. This last effect is a little imponderable though, as forests need climatic stability to grow, and this will certainly be in short supply (especially in the northern hemisphere).

Chlorofluorocarbons - CFCs - also play an important role in the greenhouse effect. These are used in aerosols, air conditioning, fridges and as a solvent. Although they can be replaced in most instances, the much-vaunted 'Montreal Protocol' signed last year actually allows for a quadrupling of CFC levels in the atmosphere by 2030. This will have a catastrophic effect on the stratospheric ozone layer, which protects living things from the harmful effects of ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. In addition to this, the ozone depletion will also increase the greenhouse effect due to more of the sun's radiation reaching the earth and increasing heating. Also, CFCs are themselves greenhouse gasses. Finally, we have the susceptibility to UV radiation of phytoplankton - which take CO₂ out of the atmosphere. The response of international capital to the ozone depletion is a lesson to all who place faith in the ability of the bourgeoisie to abandon their class interests and act rationally in relation to the environment.

Of course, it might be objected that all of these effects are difficult to predict: this is the supposed rationale for the Tories' "wait and see" attitude. This may be so, but it seems a little irresponsible to play dice with the future of humanity in that way and it must be noted that "*seldom has there been such a strong consensus among scientists on a major environmental issue [as on the greenhouse effect]*" (Scientific American Feb 1989). It would seem more judicious to argue for measures to reduce the greenhouse effect, and to point out that failure to act is yet another example of the willingness of capitalism to gamble with the future of the human species for the sake of a quick buck.

What will be the effects of this global warming? These are too numerous to detail, but they are generally presumed to be catastrophic: it is quite likely that in 50 years, whatever is done now, some low lying countries (Bangladesh, Maldives in particular) could be under water. Within the general warming that is occurring, some places will get much hotter, others much colder, some wetter, some drier. Droughts, floods, hurricanes etc will get more violent, longer and more frequent. As noted above, the northern hemisphere will experience a rise in average temperatures of double the global average. One effect will be - for example that vegetation belts will migrate northwards at an alarming rate: the prairie-forest border, which is close to Minneapolis will be 400-600 kilometres north of this city by the year 2030. It can readily be understood what effect these climate and vegetation changes could have on food production, housing etc. In fact, it is hinted in some quarters (Boyle & Ardill - "The Greenhouse Effect") that the extraordinary weather patterns of 1988 - hurricanes Joan & Gilbert, drought in the USA, and many instances of flooding - could have been caused by global warming.

The greenhouse effect is thus a political issue of global dimensions (like the threat of nuclear war) and becoming more serious day by day. Precisely because of this, it is potentially an absolutely explosive issue for world imperialism, provided socialists understand the issue and are able to show that only the fight for the socialist revolution can save the human race.

How to Cure the Greenhouse Effect?

It is easy enough to say what is required to rectify this situation: energy conservation and alternative sources (not including nuclear power), free public transport so that cars become used for recreational purposes only, the end of wasted production, planned obsolescence, waste of resources in competition, packaging and replication of commodities, ending the advertising industry, far more efficient combustion of fossil fuels, energy saving through measures to communalise consumption. In addition, it is necessary to end the destruction of forests and to have a planned programme of reforestation. Measures must also be implemented to reduce the output of the second greenhouse gas - methane. Important sources of this include cattle farts, landfill waste sites, rotting vegetation (itself probably increasing as a result of global warming). Overall, *at least a 50% reduction in consumption of fossil fuels on a world scale is required* (Scientific American Feb 1989), and a commensurate reduction in methane output. (Because methane is inflammable and is more damaging - by 20 times - than CO₂, it does mean that one way of dealing with methane is to burn it - producing CO₂ and water. This is technically easier in some cases than in others!) It should be noted that the imperialist countries produce 75% of the CO₂, from fossil fuels and run 88% of the motor cars. The reductions in these countries will have to be all the greater, because there may be a need for some expansion in fossil fuel consumption in other countries.

Such measures imply a major change in the way our lives are organised and it is for this reason that the difference between the political implications of the greenhouse effect and other environmental problems was introduced. The necessary changes are a major challenge to capitalism and socialists alike. We must ensure that such changes lead to the enhancement of the quality of life of the working people (and are understood by them as such). How the capitalists respond depends on how the green movement takes up the issue. The questions that arise in a socialist response will be discussed below.

The fight for the environment must be an anti-capitalist fight

The capitalist system has already inflicted untold damage on the environment in its pursuit of quick

profits. There is no reason to assume that the bourgeoisie is capable of implementing the changes that are necessary; even a “radically restructured” capitalist system would still run on the profit motive with its attendant waste of resources and destruction of everything which has no exchange value (of which the atmosphere is the most obvious).

However, because the changes that are required are so radical, requiring major restructuring of the energy and transport systems and of consumption patterns, an “environmental protection” programme that is implemented by pro-capitalist forces would be of a highly coercive and authoritarian character. We already have an inkling of this in the proposal to tax “environmentally unfriendly” consumer goods. This measure will reduce the living standards of the working class, and it could increase hostility to green policies, particularly as the ecology movement seems to have generally accepted it. Another example is the plan for transnational corporations to take over the rainforests in “exchange” for parts of countries’ foreign debts, also initially accepted by the world’s major environmental movements. If imperialism were to seriously tackle the greenhouse effect, then it hardly seems likely that they would cut car production by, say 90%, and fossil fuel production by over 50% without consigning tens of millions of people to the scrap heap. Similarly, they could deal with the reduction in personal mobility that ensues, not by providing free public transport, but by restricting the right to travel through pass systems for all those who do not own cars (and car ownership could be made prohibitively expensive). The use of energy to heat houses could be restricted by price mechanisms and by rationing (for those who could not afford an independent supply). Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in a highly perceptive article published over 15 years ago, warned of the potential for capitalism to use the environmental crisis for its own ends, and of the possibility that (particularly “technocratic”) ecologists could fall into this trap:

“Certainly the fight for a clean environment always contains anti- capitalist elements. Nevertheless Fascism in Germany and Italy have demonstrated how easily such elements can be turned around and become tools in the interests of capital. It is therefore not surprising that ecological protest, at least in Western Europe, almost always ends up with an appeal to the state. Under present conditions this means that it appeals to reformism and to technocratic rationality.” (NLR 84 April 1974)

Enzensberger points to the existence in 1974 of an “eco-fascist” movement in France, led by a General who supervised torture in Algeria. This may be an extreme example, but authoritarian “solutions” are given credence by the dichotomy (noted by Enzensberger) between the diagnoses of the technocratic ecologists (imminent ending of the human species) and the mildness of the political changes they are prepared to countenance:

“They are just as unwilling to consider any radical interference with the political system of the United States as they are willing to contemplate the other immense changes they spell out. The US system is introduced into their calculations as a constant factor; it is introduced not as it is, but as it appears to the white member of the middle class... it is merely a question of finding the right candidate and the right campaigns, of writing letters and launching a few modest citizens’ activities. At the most extreme, a new parliament will be set up. Imperialism does not exist. World peace will be established through disarmament.”

It is thus not the specific remedies that some ecologists propose that are necessarily the problem (though some are - see above), such as energy conservation and a turn to public transport, but that such measures in a capitalist context will need to be applied by force and legal sanction, and strengthen the coercive power of the state. Furthermore, the working class will be made to pay, both in jobs lost as industries are run down and in implementing measures to protect the environment.

Unfortunately, after telling us that “no particular skill is involved in deducing [that socialism is the

answer to the environmental crisis] from the premises of Marxist theory” and that it is “no good Marxists being right ‘in principle’, when that means the end of the world”, Enzensberger is a little short on proposals for how Marxists should approach the question with their anti-capitalist programme. Precisely because it is a global problem, we tend to be over-abstract, and allow space for those who present “solutions” through existing political structures, be it the United Nations or G7 or East-West summitry. The development of Gorbachevist “one world” ideology is another powerful factor working in the same direction. Marxists have failed to stop the peace movement falling into the “one world” trap.

We can outline some basic demands: that the working class must not pay for the environmental crisis of capitalism (and the Stalinist bureaucracies), conversion of polluting and declining industries must be done under workers’ control, a 30 hour week with no loss of pay must be implemented, a workers’ plan for ‘environment friendly’ production must be drawn up and controlled by workers and consumers. We should argue for these demands in the environment movement and fight for the mass workers’ parties and unions to adopt them. But further discussion is needed on how to mobilise working people behind such demands.

Ecology is an anti-imperialist issue

The effect of global warming will be greatest in the dependent countries, because they can least afford to take preventative measures against sudden changes in climate and sea level. In addition, as indicated above, they will face pressures from imperialism to respond in a way that serves the interests of the latter. Thatcher has already indicated that the “developing” countries must pay “their share” for the bitter fruits of imperialism. Many such countries have already experienced major dislocations in agricultural production brought about by imperialist domination. The results - over-dependence on one crop, desertification and famine, rural and urban unemployment - are well known.

Under pressure from the imperialist powers, the environmental destruction is accelerating. This is nowhere more clear than Brazil, where the debt has resulted in increasing reliance on extractive industry (iron ore and gold) for foreign exchange, causing major pollution and further destruction of the rain forests, on top of that caused by multinational/ranching interests. This in turn is destroying the Amazon, killing the indigenous people of the region, and causing large-scale desertification.

The interests of imperialism and the local oligarchy coincide in resisting a radical agrarian reform and continuing the plunder of the region for quick profits. But the actual power relation becomes clear when the imperialists decide that the destruction is out of (their) control. So they are now proposing measures such as taking control of sections of the productive forces - in the name of environmental protection - in return for lenient measures in relation to the foreign debt. The racist implication is apparent: “the Brazilians” cannot protect their own country so “we” must.

Tied into this is the question of “population control”. Despite the failure of the CIA-sponsored programmes in the fifties and sixties in their declared aim of reducing population growth in the neo-colonial countries (including in Puerto Rico where 1/3 of women of childbearing age were forcibly sterilised), there is now a move to increase spending on such a programme under the auspices of the World Bank. The rationale is the greenhouse effect, despite the fact that, as pointed out above, the main contributions to this come from the imperialist countries. The causes for the “failure” of population control programmes - the need for children to provide security for peasants in poverty (and the dependence of production in many places on the family) - were well documented in the seventies, as were the barbaric measures to forcibly sterilise women or inject them with depo-

provera.

Again, there is a chance that the Greens could end up supporting such measures. The fact that sections of the British Greens call for a population reduction in Britain of 30% is not encouraging. Not only does it appear to display a lack of faith in their own energy and resource conservation policies, population reduction cannot be anything but authoritarian (i.e. implemented by law or punitive taxes on children) outside the context of a challenge to the bourgeois nuclear family and the development of new patterns of child-rearing.

Lastly, we should remember that the greatest environmental destruction of any country was experienced by Vietnam as a result of US imperialist aggression: the US should pay \$100 bn reparations to Vietnam.

These questions must be remembered by socialists in the "west" when we agonise over the destruction of the rainforests and the life that they sustain. The responsibility for the destruction of the environment in the "third world" must be placed firmly on the shoulders of imperialism and the local oligarchies that feed on the crumbs from its table.

The Greens Pose Questions for Marxists

What "path of development" do we think a post-revolutionary "third world" country should follow? The bureaucracies of the present post-capitalist societies have copied the consumption patterns of the imperialist bourgeoisie. The tendency in these countries is for the masses to demand similar "rights" (e.g. the right to own a car, washing machine, video etc.). Some of these rights are not universally realisable without even greater destruction of the environment.

We need to be able to argue that a democratic socialist society can provide for everyone's needs without destroying the environment. Socialism will show that a policy of collective provision and use of transport, consumer durables etc, will mean greater equality, a greater range of consumer goods for more people, along with less waste and pollution. This means that, just as we oppose the patterns of investment of imperialism in the dependent countries, we should oppose their operations - in conjunction with the bureaucracy - in the post-capitalist states, which are leading to even greater inequality and environmental degradation. China is a case in point.

This raises a question always used by ecologists against Marxists: that we are advocates of "industrialism" and "growth" because we argue that socialism is only possible on the basis of abundance and the absence of need. Therefore, our policies are just as destructive of the environment. Ecologists tend to conclude that we must therefore abandon many of the fruits of industrial and technological development.

This argument falls into the same trap as that noted by Enzensberger above: some ecologists will conceive of major "technical" changes that may be necessary, but place them in the context of existing social relations. To put it at its most brash, because individual ownership of the motor car - for instance - is ecologically destructive, the argument follows that there should be no motor cars. A similar argument could be made for electricity, which is generated by all kinds of ecologically damaging techniques (fossil fuels, nuclear power, hydroelectric dams).

When Marxists talk of abundance, surely we mean an abundance of use values, not of exchange values? It is not necessary for there to be 400m cars in the world (most of which are stationary at any one time) for everyone to be able to use one when they need to. All that is required is a change in patterns of ownership and control (say by local authorities, as with library books), free public

transport, and changes in the way we organise our commuting, shopping, leisure activities etc., so that we do not need to resort to the use of cars in the way that we do now. Our critique is not of “industrialism” and “growth”; it is of private ownership and control, the profit motive and the measurement of “growth” in monetary terms. We should be careful to point out that we are in favour of the growth of use values for the working class - to be “in favour” of the “growth of exchange value” (i.e. gross domestic product etc) surely has no meaning for a socialist.

Similarly, we need to understand that it is extremely crude to measure “progress” in terms of production volume. When we analyse “progress” in the living standards of the masses in the Stalinist states, we are always careful to temper this with remarks about wastage and poor quality of goods brought about by bureaucratic planning. This seems to be correct: it is an indication that it is not only who owns goods that is a measure of quality of life, but also who gets what use out of them.

Through the greatest possible collectivisation of use values, we can achieve a much higher standard of living than is enjoyed at present by the majority, whether in the imperialist countries or the dependent ones, and at the same time carry out the measures necessary to combat the greenhouse effect. We should not be afraid of arguing that individual ownership of large consumer durables is not the “model of development” we advocate in post-capitalist societies, either in the countries where such ownership is well advanced or in those where it is still a glint in the capitalists’ eyes. This is just a particular application of the law of combined and uneven development, formulated by Trotsky. It is not necessary “or possible” for the “developing” countries to achieve the patterns of individual ownership of consumer goods as exist in the imperialist countries: they have the possibility to “leap over” this stage and move directly to more collective consumption patterns.

It could be argued that this is utopianism; that the material forces allowing for the development of such a “collective” consciousness do not exist, and cannot exist except a long time after the socialist revolution. But global warming, by showing the impossibility of the continuation of existing consumption patterns, will be able act as just such a material force on mass consciousness, if only in this negative sense.

Ecology and the family

One of the central reasons why ecology is a feminist issue flows from the arguments above: it is a powerful reason for the collectivisation of domestic labour, and this in turn will be a major factor in weakening the material forces sustaining the bourgeois nuclear family. If the family is efficient as a unit of reproduction for capitalism, from an ecological point of view it is highly inefficient.

It stands to reason that reduction of use of resources (of which energy is the most important, as I have argued above) would greatly be aided by such measures as more collective living patterns - neighbourhood restaurants, laundries etc., and that all of these will help to liberate women from domestic labour.

This approach contrasts with that of many ecologists, whose proposals, such as home-based energy saving (e.g. generating methane from sewage), growing your own vegetables etc, will generally strengthen the nuclear family, and the dependence of women, men and children on it.

Nonetheless, there are other questions which need to be addressed too. For instance, the burden on women as agricultural labourers in the dependent countries must be increasing as they battle against the effects of global warming and desertification, and try to maintain the productivity of “their” land. This must in part be the explanation for the growth of ecological groups among women in India, Kenya etc. (*Labour Briefing* 86).

Implications for Building a Socialist Ecological Movement

The outline above carries with it implicit criticisms of the green movement as presently constituted. These could be expanded on and made explicit on another occasion. But I hope that the central problem is clear - that if we fail to take a class approach on the question of the greenhouse effect we will essentially fall into the traps that imperialism will lay for us on this question. The reasons are well summed up by Enzensberger (who also deals here with the question of "consumerism" in the west):

"The knot of the ecological crisis cannot be cut with a paper knife. The crisis is inseparable from the conditions of existence systematically determined by the means of production. That is why moral appeals to the people of the 'rich' lands to lower their standard of living are totally absurd. They are not only useless but cynical. To ask the individual wage earner to differentiate between his (sic) 'real' and his 'artificial' needs is to mistake his real situation. Both are so closely connected that they constitute a relationship which is subjectively and objectively indivisible. Hunger for commodities, in all its blindness, is a product of the production of commodities, which could only be suppressed by force. We must reckon with the likelihood that bourgeois policy will systematically exploit the resulting mystifications - increasingly so as the ecological crisis takes on more menacing forms. To achieve this, it needs only to demagogically take up the proposals of the ecologists and give them political circulation. The appeal to the common good, which demands sacrifice and obedience, will be taken up by these movements together with a reactionary populism, determined to defend capitalism with anti-capitalist phrases.

"In reality, capitalism's policy on the environment, raw materials, energy and population, will put an end to the last liberal illusions. That policy cannot even be conceived without increasing repression and regimentation. Fascism has already demonstrated its capabilities as a saviour in extreme crisis situations and as the administrator of poverty. In an atmosphere of panic and uncontrollable emotions - that is to say, in the event of an ecological catastrophe which is directly perceptible on a mass scale - the ruling class will not hesitate to have recourse to such solutions. The ability of the masses to see the connection between the mode of production and the crisis in such a situation and to react offensively cannot be assumed. It depends on the degree of politicisation and organisation achieved by then."

It would be well to be aware that major catastrophes as a result of global warming are probably now unavoidable. Our task is to fight alongside the ecological movement and the labour movement for a socialist response to the environmental crisis - to achieve the necessary consciousness that Enzensberger alludes to.

P.S.

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