

A Brief History of the First Attempt at an International Ecosocialist Network (2001 - 2013)

With the First International Ecosocialist Manifesto and the Belem Ecosocialist Declaration appended.

Saturday 1 February 2020, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 27 January 2020).

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On September 2001, I had the chance of meeting Joël Kovel in Paris, on the occasion of an international Marx Conference, convened by the French Journal "Actuel Marx". We had long conversations and discovered that we shared a common interest in a socialist ecology. A few months earlier, the Fourth International had approved, in it's World Congress, an ecosocialist document, of which I had been one of the authors. We agreed that this was an important step, but believed that the left in general had too little interest in the ecological issue. What to do ?

Joel proposed that we write together an International Ecosocialist Manifesto, as a modest contribution to winning our socialist comrades to the ecological struggle. I liked the idea and we started soon to work on it. He wrote the first draft, I made some corrections and we came easily to an agreement. The document, which became known as "First International Ecosocialist Maifesto" had a very limited circulation, published only in a few radical publications. We felt we had done our duty, sending the message in a bottle thrown into the sea, hoping some people would find it.

Slowly, during the next few years, interest in ecosocialism began to increase. In 2006 Joël and me believed we could try to convene an international Ecosocialist meeting in Paris, once again on the occasion of the International Marxist Conference in October 2007. With the help of two French comrades which had taken part in the writing of the Fourth International document in 2001, Vincent Gay and Laurent Garrouste, we organised the meeting, which was relatively successful, with some 60 people from the US, France, Europe and Latin America attending. The conference decided to create an Ecosocialist International Network (EIN) to whom any person who agreed with the main ideas of the First Ecosocialist Manifesto could join. The meeting also elected a provisory board, to whom belonged, among others, Joël Kovel, Ian Angus, myself, Danielle Follet, Vincent Gay, Ariel Saleh, Derek Wall, Jonathan Neale, Pedro Ivo Batista, Georges Mitrailia and Sarah Farrow.

Three people were put in charge of writing a new manifesto, dealing mainly with the issue of climate change : Ian Angus, Joël Kovel and myself; we asked Danielle Follet to help us. This Second Manifesto, which became ready in 2008, was called "The Belem Ecosocialist Manifesto", because it was destined to be presented at the World Social Forum which took place in Belem do Para, an Amazonian town in the north of Brazil, on January 2009. The Second Manifesto was signed by hundreds of people from dozens of countries; it was printed by our comrades from the Brazilian

Ecosocialist Network (Pedro Ivo Batista) in two languages, English and Portuguese, and freely distributed at the Belem World Social Forum.

Immediately after the Forum, took place in Belem in January 2009, the Second international Ecosocialist meeting. Most of the participants were of course Brazilians and Latin Americans. An indigenous delegation from Peru was headed by Hugo Blanco, the historical leader of peasant struggles in the country, who declared at the meeting : we, the indigenous communities, have been practicing ecosocialism for the last 500 years ! A new coordinating body was elected, with a majority of women ; among others, Ariel Saleh (Australia), Terisa Turner (Canada), Margarita Aguinaga (Ecuador), Danielle Follet (France), Wahu Kaara (Kenia), Gabriela Barbosa (Brazil), Ian Angus(Canada), Joel Kovel (USA) and myself (France).

The next initiative of the EIN took place in Copenhagen in December 2009, on the occasion of the UN 15 COP Summit on Climate Change. The official conference was a total failure, but there was a mass demonstration in Copenhagen, with 100 thousand participants from all Europe, and a few from countries far away. During the Counter-Summit we organised an Ecosocialist debate, but above all, we distributed a new material during the demonstration : an Ecosocialist "comic-strip", "Copenhagen, April 12, 2049", describing the Danish town under sea...The draft for the leaflet was prepared by me, after consultation of other committee members (Joël Kovel, Ariel Salleh, Danielle Follet and others), and illustrated by drawings of Silke Stenesen Hansen, a young artist from the Danish Socialist Workers Party (Fourth International), a member of the Red-Green Alliance.

Retrospectively, the year 2009 appears as the most successful of the Ecosocialist International Network. A new conference took place in Paris in 2010, with the participation of some 33 people, among whom Hugo Blanco, on a speaking tour from Peru. A new coordinating body was elected, including Terisa Tirner, Klaus Engert, Pritam Singh, Mike Davis, Joël Kovel and myself. For various reasons this body did not function very well. But there were still a few, more modest, initiatives :

- in November 2010, in view of the Cancun 16 COP UN summit on Climate, we issued a call, under the title "Change the (capitalist) system, not the climate ! An Ecosocialist perspective". It was only signed by the name of the Network, and was published by our Mexican Ecosocialist comrades.

- in 2012, a short Ecosocialist statement on the Rio+20 UN Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, was sent and circulated among participants of the Counter-Summit. Criticising the official Summit for representing the interests of the capitalist system, the piece was signed, in the name of the Network, by Pedro Ivo Batista, Hugo Blanco, Leigh Brownhill , Klaus Engert, Ana Isla, Wahu Kaara, Joel Kovel, Michael Löwy, Salvatore Engel Di Mauro (Saed), Pritam Singh, João Alfredo Telles Melo, Terisa Turner and Eshter Vivas. It was published in the progressive Mexican daily "La Jornada" on 12/6/2012.

- The last activity of the EIN was a message of solidarity to an Ecosocialist conference which took place in Quito, Ecuador, on June 2013. It was signed by the "usual suspects", plus a few additional names : Hugo Blanco, Klaus Engert, Samuel González Contreras, Ana Isla, Wahu Kaara, Joel Kovel, Michael Löwy, Salvatore Engel Di Mauro (Saed), Jamie Moloney, Jorge Riechmann, Qunncy Saul, Pritam Singh, Pedro Ivo Batista, João Alfredo Telles Melo, Juan Tortosa, Terisa Turner, Esther Vivas.

From that moment on, the Ecosocialist International Network ceased, de facto, to function. The site was left abandoned, and no more initiatives took place.

Fortunately, thanks to John Molyneux, a new initiative is now taking place !

Michael Löwy

First International Ecosocialist Manifesto (2001)

The twenty-first century opens on a catastrophic note, with an unprecedented degree of ecological breakdown and a chaotic world order beset with terror and clusters of low-grade, disintegrative warfare that spread like gangrene across great swathes of the planet—viz., central Africa, the Middle East, Northwestern South America—and reverberate throughout the nations. In our view, the crises of ecology and those of societal breakdown are profoundly interrelated and should be seen as different manifestations of the same structural forces.

The former broadly stems from rampant industrialization that overwhelms the earth's capacity to buffer and contain ecological destabilization. The latter stems from the form of imperialism known as globalization, with its disintegrative effects on societies that stand in its path. Moreover, these underlying forces are essentially different aspects of the same drive, which must be identified as the central dynamic that moves the whole: the expansion of the world capitalist system.

We reject all euphemisms or propagandistic softening of the brutality of this regime: all greenwashing of its ecological costs, all mystification of the human costs under the names of democracy and human rights. We insist instead upon looking at capital from the standpoint of what it has really done. Acting on nature and its ecological balance, the regime, with its imperative to constantly expand profitability, exposes ecosystems to destabilizing pollutants, fragments habitats that have evolved over aeons to allow the flourishing of organisms, squanders resources, and reduces the sensuous vitality of nature to the cold exchangeability required for the accumulation of capital. From the side of humanity, with its requirements for self-determination, community, and a meaningful existence, capital reduces the majority of the world's people to a mere reservoir of labor power while discarding much of the remainder as useless nuisances. It has invaded and undermined the integrity of communities through its global mass culture of consumerism and depoliticization. It has expanded disparities in wealth and power to levels unprecedented in human history. It has worked hand in glove with a network of corrupt and subservient client states whose local elites carry out the work of repression while sparing the center of its opprobrium. And it has set going a network of transtatal organizations under the overall supervision of the Western powers and the superpower United States, to undermine the autonomy of the periphery and bind it into indebtedness while maintaining a huge military apparatus to enforce compliance to the capitalist center. We believe that the present capitalist system cannot regulate, much less overcome, the crises it has set going. It cannot solve the ecological crisis because to do so requires setting limits upon accumulation—an unacceptable option for a system predicated upon the rule: Grow or Die! And it cannot solve the crisis posed by terror and other forms of violent rebellion because to do so would mean abandoning the logic of empire, which would impose unacceptable limits on growth and the whole "way of life" sustained by empire. Its only remaining option is to resort to brutal force, thereby increasing alienation and sowing the seed of further terrorism . . . and further counter-terrorism, evolving into a new and malignant variation of fascism. In sum, the capitalist world system is historically bankrupt. It has become an empire unable to adapt, whose very gigantism exposes its underlying weakness. It is, in the language of ecology, profoundly unsustainable, and must be changed fundamentally, nay, replaced, if there is to be a future worth living. Thus the stark choice once posed by Rosa Luxemburg returns: Socialism or Barbarism!, where the face of the latter now reflects the imprint of the intervening century and assumes the countenance of ecocatastrophe, terror counterterror, and their fascist degeneration.

But why socialism, why revive this word seemingly consigned to the rubbish-heap of history by the failings of its twentieth century interpretations? For this reason only: that however beaten down and unrealized, the notion of socialism still stands for the supersession of capital. If capital is to be overcome, a task now given the urgency of the survival of civilization itself, the outcome will perforce be “socialist, for that is the term which signifies the breakthrough into a post-capitalist society. If we say that capital is radically unsustainable and breaks down into the barbarism outlined above, then we are also saying that we need to build a “socialism” capable of overcoming the crises capital has set going. And if socialisms past have failed to do so, then it is our obligation, if we choose against submitting to a barbarous end, to struggle for one that succeeds. And just as barbarism has changed in a manner reflective of the century since Luxemburg enunciated her fateful alternative, so too, must the name, and the reality, of a socialism become adequate for this time.

It is for these reasons that we choose to name our interpretation of socialism as an ecosocialism, and dedicate ourselves to its realization.

Why Ecosocialism?

We see ecosocialism not as the denial but as the realization of the “first-epoch” socialisms of the twentieth century, in the context of the ecological crisis. Like them, it builds on the insight that capital is objectified past labor, and grounds itself in the free development of all producers, or to use another way of saying this, an undoing of the separation of the producers from the means of production. We understand that this goal was not able to be implemented by first-epoch socialism, for reasons too complex to take up here, except to summarize as various effects of underdevelopment in the context of hostility by existing capitalist powers. This conjuncture had numerous deleterious effects on existing socialisms, chiefly, the denial of internal democracy along with an emulation of capitalist productivism, and led eventually to the collapse of these societies and the ruin of their natural environments. Ecosocialism retains the emancipatory goals of first-epoch socialism, and rejects both the attenuated, reformist aims of social democracy and the the productivist structures of the bureaucratic variations of socialism. It insists, rather, upon redefining both the path and the goal of socialist production in an ecological framework. It does so specifically in respect to the “limits on growth” essential for the sustainability of society. These are embraced, not however, in the sense of imposing scarcity, hardship and repression. The goal, rather, is a transformation of needs, and a profound shift toward the qualitative dimension and away from the quantitative. From the standpoint of commodity production, this translates into a valorization of use-values over exchange-values—a project of far-reaching significance grounded in immediate economic activity.

The generalization of ecological production under socialist conditions can provide the ground for the overcoming of the present crises. A society of freely associated producers does not stop at its own democratization. It must, rather, insist on the freeing of all beings as its ground and goal. It overcomes thereby the imperialist impulse both subjectively and objectively. In realizing such a goal, it struggles to overcome all forms of domination, including, especially, those of gender and race. And it surpasses the conditions leading to fundamentalist distortions and their terrorist manifestations. In sum, a world society is posited in a degree of ecological harmony with nature unthinkable under present conditions. A practical outcome of these tendencies would be expressed, for example, in a withering away of the dependency upon fossil fuels integral to industrial capitalism. And this in turn can provide the material point of release of the lands subjugated by oil imperialism, while enabling the containment of global warming, along with other afflictions of the ecological crisis.

No one can read these prescriptions without thinking, first, of how many practical and theoretical questions they raise, and second and more dishearteningly, of how remote they are from the present

configuration of the world, both as this is anchored in institutions and as it is registered in consciousness. We need not elaborate these points, which should be instantly recognizable to all. But we would insist that they be taken in their proper perspective. Our project is neither to lay out every step of this way nor to yield to the adversary because of the preponderance of power he holds. It is, rather, to develop the logic of a sufficient and necessary transformation of the current order, and to begin developing the intermediate steps towards this goal. We do so in order to think more deeply into these possibilities, and at the same moment, begin the work of drawing together with all those of like mind. If there is any merit in these arguments, then it must be the case that similar thoughts, and practices to realize these thoughts, will be coordinatively germinating at innumerable points around the world. Ecosocialism will be international, and universal, or it will be nothing. The crises of our time can and must be seen as revolutionary opportunities, which it is our obligation to affirm and bring into existence.

Joel Kovel and Michael Lowy

Paris, Sept 2001

BELEM ECOSOCIALIST DECLARATION (2008)

This Declaration was prepared by a committee elected at the Paris Ecosocialist Conference of 2007 (Ian Angus, Joel Kovel, Michael Löwy), with the help of Danielle Follett.

*"The world is suffering from a fever due to climate change,
and the disease is the capitalist development model."*

— Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, September 2007

Humanity's Choice

Humanity today faces a stark choice: ecosocialism or barbarism.

We need no more proof of the barbarity of capitalism, the parasitical system that exploits humanity and nature alike. Its sole motor is the imperative toward profit and thus the need for constant growth. It wastefully creates unnecessary products, squandering the environment's limited resources and returning to it only toxins and pollutants. Under capitalism, the only measure of success is how much more is sold every day, every week, every year – involving the creation of vast quantities of products that are directly harmful to both humans and nature, commodities that cannot be produced without spreading disease, destroying the forests that produce the oxygen we breathe, demolishing ecosystems, and treating our water, air and soil like sewers for the disposal of industrial waste.

Capitalism's need for growth exists on every level, from the individual enterprise to the system as a whole. The insatiable hunger of corporations is facilitated by imperialist expansion in search of ever greater access to natural resources, cheap labor and new markets. Capitalism has always been ecologically destructive, but in our lifetimes these assaults on the earth have accelerated. Quantitative change is giving way to qualitative transformation, bringing the world to a tipping point, to the edge of disaster. A growing body of scientific research has identified many ways in

which small temperature increases could trigger irreversible, runaway effects – such as rapid melting of the Greenland ice sheet or the release of methane buried in permafrost and beneath the ocean – that would make catastrophic climate change inevitable.

Left unchecked, global warming will have devastating effects on human, animal and plant life. Crop yields will drop drastically, leading to famine on a broad scale. Hundreds of millions of people will be displaced by droughts in some areas and by rising ocean levels in others. Chaotic, unpredictable weather will become the norm. Air, water and soil will be poisoned. Epidemics of malaria, cholera and even deadlier diseases will hit the poorest and most vulnerable members of every society.

The impact of the ecological crisis is felt most severely by those whose lives have already been ravaged by imperialism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and indigenous peoples everywhere are especially vulnerable. Environmental destruction and climate change constitute an act of aggression by the rich against the poor.

Ecological devastation, resulting from the insatiable need to increase profits, is not an accidental feature of capitalism: it is built into the system's DNA and cannot be reformed away. Profit-oriented production only considers a short-term horizon in its investment decisions, and cannot take into account the long-term health and stability of the environment. Infinite economic expansion is incompatible with finite and fragile ecosystems, but the capitalist economic system cannot tolerate limits on growth; its constant need to expand will subvert any limits that might be imposed in the name of "sustainable development." Thus the inherently unstable capitalist system cannot regulate its own activity, much less overcome the crises caused by its chaotic and parasitical growth, because to do so would require setting limits upon accumulation – an unacceptable option for a system predicated upon the rule: Grow or Die!

If capitalism remains the dominant social order, the best we can expect is unbearable climate conditions, an intensification of social crises and the spread of the most barbaric forms of class rule, as the imperialist powers fight among themselves and with the global south for continued control of the world's diminishing resources.

At worst, human life may not survive.

Capitalist Strategies for Change

There is no lack of proposed strategies for contending with ecological ruin, including the crisis of global warming looming as a result of the reckless increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide. The great majority of these strategies share one common feature: they are devised by and on behalf of the dominant global system, capitalism.

It is no surprise that the dominant global system which is responsible for the ecological crisis also sets the terms of the debate about this crisis, for capital commands the means of production of knowledge, as much as that of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Accordingly, its politicians, bureaucrats, economists and professors send forth an endless stream of proposals, all variations on the theme that the world's ecological damage can be repaired without disruption of market mechanisms and of the system of accumulation that commands the world economy.

But a person cannot serve two masters – the integrity of the earth and the profitability of capitalism. One must be abandoned, and history leaves little question about the allegiances of the vast majority of policy-makers. There is every reason, therefore, to radically doubt the capacity of established measures to check the slide to ecological catastrophe.

And indeed, beyond a cosmetic veneer, the reforms over the past thirty-five years have been a

monstrous failure. Isolated improvements do of course occur, but they are inevitably overwhelmed and swept away by the ruthless expansion of the system and the chaotic character of its production.

One example demonstrates the failure: in the first four years of the 21st Century, global carbon emissions were nearly three times as great per annum as those of the decade of the 1990s, despite the appearance of the Kyoto Protocols in 1997.

Kyoto employs two devices: the “Cap and Trade” system of trading pollution credits to achieve certain reductions in emissions, and projects in the global south – the so-called “Clean Development Mechanisms” – to offset emissions in the highly industrialized nations. These instruments all rely upon market mechanisms, which means, first of all, that atmospheric carbon dioxide becomes a commodity under the control of the same interests that created global warming. Polluters are not compelled to reduce their carbon emissions, but allowed to use their power over money to control the carbon market for their own ends, which include the devastating exploration for yet more carbon-based fuels. Nor is there a limit to the amount of emission credits which can be issued by compliant governments.

Since verification and evaluation of results are impossible, the Kyoto regime is not only incapable of controlling emissions, it also provides ample opportunities for evasion and fraud of all kinds. As even the Wall Street Journal put it in March, 2007, emissions trading “would make money for some very large corporations, but don’t believe for a minute that this charade would do much about global warming.”

The Bali climate meetings in 2007 opened the way for even greater abuses in the period ahead. Bali avoided any mention of the goals for drastic carbon reduction put forth by the best climate science (90% by 2050); it abandoned the peoples of the global south to the mercy of capital by giving jurisdiction over the process to the World Bank; and made offsetting of carbon pollution even easier.

In order to affirm and sustain our human future, a revolutionary transformation is needed, where all particular struggles take part in a greater struggle against capital itself. This larger struggle cannot remain merely negative and anti-capitalist. It must announce and build a different kind of society, and this is ecosocialism.

The Ecosocialist Alternative

The ecosocialist movement aims to stop and to reverse the disastrous process of global warming in particular and of capitalist ecocide in general, and to construct a radical and practical alternative to the capitalist system. Ecosocialism is grounded in a transformed economy founded on the non-monetary values of social justice and ecological balance. It criticizes both capitalist “market ecology” and productivist socialism, which ignored the earth’s equilibrium and limits. It redefines the path and goal of socialism within an ecological and democratic framework.

Ecosocialism involves a revolutionary social transformation, which will imply the limitation of growth and the transformation of needs by a profound shift away from quantitative and toward qualitative economic criteria, an emphasis on use-value instead of exchange-value.

These aims require both democratic decision-making in the economic sphere, enabling society to collectively define its goals of investment and production, and the collectivization of the means of production. Only collective decision-making and ownership of production can offer the longer-term perspective that is necessary for the balance and sustainability of our social and natural systems.

The rejection of productivism and the shift away from quantitative and toward qualitative economic

criteria involve rethinking the nature and goals of production and economic activity in general. Essential creative, non-productive and reproductive human activities, such as householding, child-rearing, care, child and adult education, and the arts, will be key values in an ecosocialist economy.

Clean air and water and fertile soil, as well as universal access to chemical-free food and renewable, non-polluting energy sources, are basic human and natural rights defended by ecosocialism. Far from being “despotic,” collective policy-making on the local, regional, national and international levels amounts to society’s exercise of communal freedom and responsibility. This freedom of decision constitutes a liberation from the alienating economic “laws” of the growth-oriented capitalist system.

To avoid global warming and other dangers threatening human and ecological survival, entire sectors of industry and agriculture must be suppressed, reduced, or restructured and others must be developed, while providing full employment for all. Such a radical transformation is impossible without collective control of the means of production and democratic planning of production and exchange. Democratic decisions on investment and technological development must replace control by capitalist enterprises, investors and banks, in order to serve the long-term horizon of society’s and nature’s common good.

The most oppressed elements of human society, the poor and indigenous peoples, must take full part in the ecosocialist revolution, in order to revitalize ecologically sustainable traditions and give voice to those whom the capitalist system cannot hear. Because the peoples of the global south and the poor in general are the first victims of capitalist destruction, their struggles and demands will help define the contours of the ecologically and economically sustainable society in creation. Similarly, gender equality is integral to ecosocialism, and women’s movements have been among the most active and vocal opponents of capitalist oppression. Other potential agents of ecosocialist revolutionary change exist in all societies.

Such a process cannot begin without a revolutionary transformation of social and political structures based on the active support, by the majority of the population, of an ecosocialist program. The struggle of labour – workers, farmers, the landless and the unemployed – for social justice is inseparable from the struggle for environmental justice. Capitalism, socially and ecologically exploitative and polluting, is the enemy of nature and of labour alike.

Ecosocialism proposes radical transformations in:

1. the energy system, by replacing carbon-based fuels and biofuels with clean sources of power under community control: wind, geothermal, wave, and above all, solar power.
2. the transportation system, by drastically reducing the use of private trucks and cars, replacing them with free and efficient public transportation;
3. present patterns of production, consumption, and building, which are based on waste, inbuilt obsolescence, competition and pollution, by producing only sustainable and recyclable goods and developing green architecture;
4. food production and distribution, by defending local food sovereignty as far as this is possible, eliminating polluting industrial agribusinesses, creating sustainable agro-ecosystems and working actively to renew soil fertility.

To theorize and to work toward realizing the goal of green socialism does not mean that we should not also fight for concrete and urgent reforms right now. Without any illusions about “clean capitalism,” we must work to impose on the powers that be – governments, corporations,

international institutions – some elementary but essential immediate changes:

- drastic and enforceable reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases,
- development of clean energy sources,
- provision of an extensive free public transportation system,
- progressive replacement of trucks by trains,
- creation of pollution clean-up programs,
- elimination of nuclear energy, and war spending.

These and similar demands are at the heart of the agenda of the Global Justice movement and the World Social Forums, which have promoted, since Seattle in 1999, the convergence of social and environmental movements in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

Environmental devastation will not be stopped in conference rooms and treaty negotiations: only mass action can make a difference. Urban and rural workers, peoples of the global south and indigenous peoples everywhere are at the forefront of this struggle against environmental and social injustice, fighting exploitative and polluting multinationals, poisonous and disenfranchising agribusinesses, invasive genetically modified seeds, biofuels that only aggravate the current food crisis. We must further these social-environmental movements and build solidarity between anticapitalist ecological mobilizations in the North and the South.

This Ecosocialist Declaration is a call to action. The entrenched ruling classes are powerful, yet the capitalist system reveals itself every day more financially and ideologically bankrupt, unable to overcome the economic, ecological, social, food and other crises it engenders. And the forces of radical opposition are alive and vital. On all levels, local, regional and international, we are fighting to create an alternative system based in social and ecological justice.

P.S.

- Global Ecosocialist Network. 27th January 2020:
<http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net/2020/01/27/a-brief-history-of-the-first-attempt-at-an-international-ecosocialist-network-2001-2013/>
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