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world revolution

Supplement on ecology

The future of the planet cannot be left in the hands of the capitalist class

Capitalist civilisation – this world system based on wage labour and production for profit – is dying. Like ancient Roman slavery or feudal serfdom, it is doomed to disappear. But unlike previous systems, it threatens to take the whole of humanity with it.

For over a hundred years the symptoms of its decline have become more and more evident. Two world wars of unprecedented levels of destruction, followed by decades of proxy conflicts between two imperialist blocs (USA and USSR), conflicts which always contained the menace of a third and final world war. Since the eastern bloc collapsed in 1989, we have not seen peace but increasingly chaotic local and regional wars, like the ones currently ravaging the Middle East. We have been through global economic convulsions, like those in the 1930s, the 70s, or 2008, which have plunged millions into unemployment and poverty and which accelerate the drive towards open warfare. And when capitalism has succeeded in restoring accumulation – whether in the wake of massive destruction, as after 1945, or by doping itself with debt – we now understand that the very growth and expansion of capital adds a new menace to the planet through the destruction of nature itself.

Rosa Luxemburg in 1916, responding to the horrors of the first world war, pointed to the choice facing humanity: “either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration – a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat” (*The Junius Pamphlet*).

Unlike the slave system, which eventually made way for feudalism, or feudalism in turn, which



Area of the Amazon destroyed by fire

allowed capitalism to grow inside it, this present system in its death throes will not automatically give rise to new social relations. A new society can only be built through the “conscious active struggle of the international proletariat” – through the coming together of all the world’s exploited, recognising themselves as a single class with the same interests in every part of the world.

This is an immense task, made more difficult by the loss of a sense of class identity over the past few decades, so that even many of those who feel that there is something profoundly wrong with the present system find it hard to accept that the working class exists at all, let alone that it has the unique capacity to change the world.

And yet proletarian revolution remains the only hope for the planet because it signifies the end of all systems where humanity is dominated by blind economic forces, the first society where all production is consciously planned to meet the needs of humanity in its interaction with nature. It is based on the possibility and the necessity for

human beings to take social life into their own hands.

It is for this reason that we must oppose the slogans and methods of those organising the current climate protests, calling on us to exercise our democratic rights to demonstrate or vote with the aim of putting pressure on governments and political parties to react to the ecological crisis.

This is a deception because the role of all these governments and parties – whether of the right or the left – is to manage and defend the very system which is at the root of the multiple dangers facing the planet.

The choices we are offered by the politicians of all stripes are false choices. A Brexit Britain or a Britain that remains in the EU will not shield the working class from the storms brewing in the world economy. A USA run according to Trump’s “America First” vandalism, or the more traditional “multilateral” policies of other factions, will still be an imperialist power compelled to defend its status against all the other imperialist powers. Governments that deny climate change or governments that chatter about investing in a “New Green Deal” will still be obliged to maintain a profitable national economy and thus carry out incessant attacks on working class living conditions. They will still be caught up in the same drive to accumulate which is turning the Earth into a desert.

But, we are told, at least we can vote for a different team, and in countries where even this “right” is denied, we can demand that it is granted to us.

In fact, the illusion that we can have some control over the juggernaut of capitalism by casting our votes every few years is integral to the whole fraud of capitalist democracy. The vote, the polling booth, not only keeps us trapped in the false choices on offer, but is itself an expression of our powerlessness, reducing us to the atomised individual “citizens” of this or that state.

The class struggle of the proletariat has shown a real alternative to this institutionalised impotence. In 1917-19, the working class rebelled against the slaughter of war and formed *workers’ councils* in Russia, Germany, Hungary and other countries, councils of elected and recallable delegates from workplace and other assemblies that for the first time contained the potential for a conscious control of political and social life. This massive international uprising brought the war to an end as the rulers of the warring camps needed to unite their forces to crush the menace of revolution.

Humanity has paid a heavy cost for this defeat: all the barbarism of the last hundred years has its roots in the failure of the first attempt to overthrow world capital. It will pay an even heavier cost if the working class does not recover its forces and make a second assault on the heavens.

This may seem a distant prospect but as long as capitalism exists there will be class struggle. And because capitalism in its agony has no choice but to increase the exploitation and repression of its wage slaves, the potential remains for the resistance of the latter to move from the defensive to the offensive, from the economic to the directly political, from instinctive revolt to the organised overthrow of capitalism. ICC, 16.11.19

Extinction Rebellion: bourgeois reformism in disguise

In October 2019 Extinction Rebellion (XR) held a 2-week autumn “International rebellion”, planned for 60 cities worldwide. In the UK this involved demonstrations, the occupation of road junctions, climbing on trains, erecting a structure in Oxford Circus, getting arrested, and generally staging stunts that would give publicity to the dire state of the world’s ecology. On the ‘theoretical side’ the booklet *Common Sense for the 21st Century / Only Nonviolent Rebellion Can Now Stop Climate Breakdown and Social Collapse* (quotes from this unless otherwise indicated) by Roger Hallam, one of XR’s leaders, provides the basis for XR’s activity, and their activity is very much in line with the booklet.

The responses to XR’s activity have been mixed. In the press you can see agreement that they are drawing attention to important matters, but disapproval of what they do for publicity. There are also the celebrities and leftists who give XR uncritical support. Typically, the SWP praise “people braving arrests and media attacks with brilliant displays of creativity and resistance”. “XR has faced a host of attacks this week—from the media, the police and right wing politicians. Despite this, rebels are building a movement which has managed to face down repeated pressure from the state—and are having fun while doing it. They are raising demands for a radical transformation of society, and creating a space to fight for that.”

Meanwhile there are the traditional conservative reactions to protests, characterising XR events as a nuisance, as the actions of ‘hippies’ and ‘crusties’. Alongside this there are the ‘contrarians’ of *Spiked* who are against “Extinction Rebellion’s war on the working class. These eco-poshos are full of loathing for the aspirational poor.” When an XR protester was dragged from the top of a tube train and attacked by commuters *Spiked* declared that “Today’s clashes on the Tube between the commuting working classes and the time-rich, bourgeois farmongers of the XR cult is a wonderful illustration of the elitist nature of eco-politics and of rising public fury with the eco-agenda.”

For a serious critique of XR it is necessary to use the tools of marxism, understanding social phenomena in the context of capitalist society, in the clash of interests between the ruling capitalist class and the working class - a class that is exploited, but has the capacity to overthrow capitalism. Hallam’s work is not just a theoretical basis for different means of protest: it shows which side XR is on in the struggle between classes.

Is XR against reformism?

Common Sense opposes ‘reformists’ “They offer gradualist solutions which they claim will work. It is time to admit that this is false, and it is a lie. They therefore divert popular opinion and the public’s attention and energy away from the task at hand: radical collective action against the political regime which is planning our collective suicide”. And yet XR’s whole policy is reformist. All other social questions have to be put on hold until capitalism commits itself to addressing the ‘climate emergency’. This is echoed in the *Guardian* newspaper’s assertion of “the climate emergency as the defining issue of our times.” XR’s central concern is the environment, and the possibility of the capitalist state being able, through measures like taxes and tariffs and the decommissioning of harmful technology, to prevent eco-genocide. In theory and practice they want to present ecology as a separate issue rather than viewing capitalism as a global system that gives rise to economic crisis and imperialist war as well as ecological depredation.

XR’s approach to the repressive apparatus of the state is particularly illuminating. *Common Sense* says “A proactive approach to the police is an effective way of enabling mass civil disobedience in the present context. This means meeting police as soon as they arrive on the scene and saying two things clearly: ‘this is a nonviolent peaceful action’ and ‘we respect that you have to do your

job here’. We have repeated evidence that this calms down police officers thus opening the way to subsequent civil interactions. The Extinction Rebellion actions have consistently treated the police in a polite way when we are arrested and at the police stations”. XR prides itself on being reasonable and cooperative “Often a face-to-face meeting with police is effective as they are able to understand that the people they are dealing with are reasonable and communicative.” XR sees no problem in the police managing XR events “It is better for the police to manage an orderly and low-cost episode which is compatible with our interest in having a large number of people take part in a highly symbolic and dramatic act” From the standpoint of the ruling class, XR are not seen as a threat to those in power, just an occasional nuisance for traffic.



Certainly, the leadership of XR do not see the police as a threat; on the contrary, they are seen as instrumental in assisting in XR’s impact by making multiple arrests. As other critics have said “XR leaders are more than respectful to the police. They actively assist them in making arrests and the courts in securing conviction” (https://libcom.org/blog/extinction-rebellion-not-struggle-we-need-pt-1-19072019#footnoteref3_o5k5dbl). This article by the Out of the Woods¹ collective also reports that “Hallam claims that the Metropolitan Police ‘are probably one of the most civilized forces in the world’”. Against XR’s view, the historical experience of the exploited and oppressed has been that the police, along with the courts, prisons, security services and army, are integral parts of the capitalist state’s apparatus of repression. Anything that threatens capitalist order will be met by the force of the state, in particular by the police.

A hierarchical vision of ‘revolution’

XR claim to be advocates of some sort of ‘revolution’, but think that “a dogmatic pursuit of discredited revolutionary models can be socially ruinous.” Hallam is so confident that XR planning is the key that, without it, “we are left with directionless and spontaneous uprisings ... which research shows usually lead to authoritarian outcomes and civil war”. *Common Sense* asks why “revolutionary episodes have failed miserably over the past 30 years”, saying that the answer lies in “the most fundamental question of politics – ‘who decides?’”. It’s not obvious what these recent ‘revolutionary episodes’ have been. We might ask ourselves what ‘revolutionary episodes’ have taken place in the past 30 years? Hallam refers to Egypt and Ukraine, and the ‘Gilets Jaunes’ in France. In reality, none of these movements were revolutionary: the Ukrainian Maidan Square events of 2014 were entirely engulfed in nationalism, the ‘Gilets Jaunes’ is an inter-classist movement dominated by populism. The events in Egypt in 2011 were different because there was a definite influence of the class struggle, but it was nowhere near posing the question of overthrowing the capitalist system. Thus Hallam performs a familiar trick here: debasing the concept of revolution to mean any kind of social unrest

1. A libertarian collective that has a blog on libcom about environmental issues. They have recently produced part two of their critique of XR, focusing on the hierarchical reality behind its claim of being a “holocracy” without leaders. <https://libcom.org/blog/xr-pt-2-31102019>

or political coup, and obscuring what revolution means and how it can come about. For marxists, the only revolutionary force in capitalist society is the working class, and a proletarian revolution is the only process that can overturn the capitalist state. *Common Sense* has a very different view of the world.

For a start, there are a number of different elements that make up the XR conception of ‘rebellion’. Hallam presents the case as though it’s the result of serious scientific study “The historical record shows that successful civil resistance ‘episodes’ last between three to six months” or “The most effective act of mass civil disobedience is to have a significant number of people (at least 5,000-10,000 initially) occupy public spaces in a capital city from several days to several weeks.” All this goes along with an understanding that “1% of the general population will lead the disruption”. One of XR’s 10 basic principles focuses on “mobilising 3.5% of the population to achieve system change”. This would seem to be a classic example of elitism. In answer to the questions ‘who decides?’, the answer is: a small minority, mobilised by XR, who will somehow compel the state to negotiate: “When the authorities lose the ability to stop mass mobilisation the regime is forced to negotiate”.

Capitalist society has driven humanity into a deadly impasse and there is no way out of it except through a massive and radical mobilisation of the exploited class and the most gigantic change in consciousness in human history. To count on only a small minority to carry this out makes a mockery of the enormous challenge facing the working class and humanity

Adapting the institutions of bourgeois rule

XR is quite comfortable with the institutions of bourgeois rule. Hallam and some other XR activists stood in the 2019 Euro elections. Of course, they claimed not to be a political party, but were happy to stand alongside all the rest of the bourgeois politicians selling their ideological wares, propaganda about the climate fitting in alongside nationalism, populism, racism, Stalinism and all the other campaigns for changes within capitalism. At different moments *Common Sense* does propose various different bodies that might be involved in ‘social change’. For example, there is the idea of a “National Citizens’ Assembly selected by sortition to work out the programme of measures to deal with the crisis. Sortition involves selecting the members of the assembly randomly from the whole population and uses quota sampling to ensure that it is representative of the demographic composition of the country.” This is something that the Conservative government favours. Letters were sent out to 30,000 households across the UK inviting people to join a citizens’ assembly on climate change. “The invitees to Climate Assembly UK have been selected at random from across the UK. From those who respond, 110 people will be chosen as a representative sample of the population” (*Guardian* 2/11/19). This is not a basis for ‘social change’, since it fits perfectly well into the other institutions of bourgeois democracy. Such non-threatening assemblies are in marked contrast to the various assemblies or councils created by the working class in its attempts to defend its interests, and which, ultimately, have the capacity to overthrow capitalism.

In order to take responsible decisions we do not need delegates picked in a random manner from the population at large. Proletarians fighting this system need delegates who have clear ideas, a conviction and an orientation on how to tackle the roots of the mechanisms of capitalist destruction. We cannot place our fate in the hands of a lottery selection of delegates: we must be able to trust that those who are elected really represent and defend our interests. Furthermore since such delegates can only operate as expressions of a class in movement, genuine workers’ councils can create a

‘rapport de force’ which can push back the ruling class and prepare the ground for its overthrow.

Among other propositions from Hallam are People’s Assemblies that will discuss ecological questions. As opposed to working class self-organisation and discussion within an associated class, in Hallam’s assemblies “Experts from around the world can help train facilitators and produce agendas.” Here we have bodies driven by ‘experts’ to train ‘facilitators’ and fix agendas, with no intention to threaten the existing order of things

XR does not want to overturn the apparatus of capitalist democracy. “Parliament would remain, but in an advisory role to this assembly of ordinary people, randomly selected from all around the country who will deliberate on the central question of our contemporary national life – how do we avoid extinction?” It also sees a role for local councils and NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. Fundamentally, XR’s shopping list of eco-demands is seen as possible within one country and within the present social system. Despite the ‘corruption’ of the political system, the ‘political class’ can be made to negotiate, to dismantle all that is harmful to the environment.

Promoting “national pride”

In *Common Sense* there is much advice on how to approach the media, how to speak, what to say, how to avoid jargon. Implicitly, throughout the booklet a sense of values emerges. It says that “Words like honour, duty, tradition, nation, and legacy should be used at every opportunity.” We can read about using “Martin Luther King’s speeches as a prime example of how to reclaim the framings of national pride” Since its foundation in April 2018 XR has spread from the UK to other countries, like the US, Australia, Germany and other parts of Europe. While it has an international presence, it is fully in favour of reviving such values as “national pride”, which is integral to all forms of bourgeois ideology.

Although it might seem to have a ‘radical’ approach to protest, XR is actually quite cautious about economic action. “Direct action, as a way of creating political change, has been subject to a simplistic analysis that sees winning and losing in narrow material terms. There is a strong argument for this approach as confrontation, strikes, blockades, pickets, stoppages, economic threat and disruption can certainly bring opponents to the table – as shown by the long-term success of many labour strikes around the world.” Without dwelling on the “long term success of many labour strikes” (no evidence is presented) Hallam is concerned that “raising the economic costs for an opponent is highly polarising”. He thinks that the battle for ‘hearts and minds’ is more important than an economic struggle. For the working class, the ‘economic struggle’ is part of the defence of its class interests. In the battle of ideas there is an opposition between XR’s protests on the climate emergency bringing the bourgeois state to see sense, and the central idea of marxism: the revolutionary capacity of the working class to overthrow capitalism, which can only come about as a result of the defence of its material interests.

Apparently, one of the inspirations for the work of Hallam/XR is *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan. The latter author is a strategic planner with the US Department of State and has worked with the European/NATO policy office of the U.S. Department of Defense, and at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. Ideas from such a source are not likely to challenge the capitalist state or other institutions of bourgeois rule.

Recuperating real concerns

There is certainly a very widespread concern with the state of the planet, a desire to react against

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The Green New Deal or the greenwashing of capitalism

Media campaigns on climate change often pit the urgent necessity to stop releasing greenhouse gases against the particular needs of workers or even “the uneducated”. We have the Yellow Vests in France originally protesting against a carbon tax that would make the cost of petrol prohibitive when there is no adequate public transport, or the slogan “Trump digs coal” as he pretended to defend the coal industry and the workers who rely on it. The campaign for a Green New Deal (or sometimes a Green Industrial Revolution) claims to solve the problems of climate change, unemployment and inequality all at the same time. For example: “The Sunrise Movement’s Green New Deal would eliminate greenhouse gas emissions from electricity, transportation, manufacturing, agriculture and other sectors within 10 years. It would also aim for 100% renewable energy and includes a job guarantee program ‘to assure a living wage job to every person who wants one’. It would seek to ‘mitigate deeply entrenched racial, regional and gender-based inequalities in income and wealth’”.¹

The need to address the destructive effect of capitalism on nature, and particularly the danger of greenhouse gases driving climate change, is undeniable. So too is the increase in the inequality intrinsic to capitalism, and the fact that economists are already pointing out the way increases in debt and the trade war between the USA and China are signs of a new recession. It makes the Green New Deal sound like a no-brainer.

If it sounds too good to be true...

Those who warn against con-men often say that if a deal sounds too good to be true it probably is. So let’s take a hard look at the Green New Deal – from the point of view of its reference to the state capitalist measures of Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s; from the point of view of the inability of the capitalist nation state to address a global problem; considering the implications of the policy for the environment; and most importantly the way the policy hides the real nature of capitalism and acts to undermine the development of the working class’ consciousness and struggle.

The Green New Deal takes its inspiration from a state capitalist policy in the 1930s, to restart economic growth in response to the depression². The New Deal itself looked back to the state direction of the economy in the previous Great War in 1917-18, and as well as paying for much needed infrastructure the Public Works Administration “built numerous warships, including two aircraft carriers; the money came from the PWA agency. PWA also built warplanes, while the WPA built military bases and airfields”³. In this it was not unlike the policies in Germany at the time, when

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/29/green-new-deal-plans-proposal-ocasio-cortez-sunrise-movement>

2. See ‘90 years after the 1929 crash: decadent capitalism can never escape the crisis of overproduction’, https://en.internationalism.org/content/16760/90-years-after-1929-crash-decadent-capitalism-can-never-escape-crisis-overproduction#_ftncf2

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Deal

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the future capitalism has in store, but XR provide an ideology and a schedule of protests to recuperate such concerns and militant energies and channel them into support for the capitalist system that is at the root of environmental decline. As with the propaganda from all the green parties over the last 40 years, or the more recent campaign around Greta Thunberg, it is a dangerous illusion to claim that capitalism can address the state of the environment.

All the evidence shows that, far from conceding, capitalism is showing more and more signs of being capable of taking all humanity down with it. The interests of the working class are antagonistic to capital and cannot be satisfied within this

many of the autobahns were built as part of the process of gearing up for the coming war.

Climate change is a global problem, one that cannot be addressed nation by nation, yet the Green New Deal wants to do just that: “A green new deal for the UK...”, “Scotland is uniquely placed, given its abundance of renewable resources ...”⁴, “Aiming to virtually eliminate US greenhouse gas pollution...”⁵. This is nonsense: even the accounting of greenhouse gas production on a national scale is fraudulent, for instance 40% of UK consumption of commodities whose production gives off greenhouse gases, being imported, are not counted in the national figures. Capitalism pollutes world-wide, and this spreads to the furthest reaches of the oceans and the most desolate parts of the Arctic.

Facile ideas of new growth based on green energy may promise to sustain economic growth, based on state spending, but they are not founded on any real global consideration of the effects of the environmental destruction and greenhouse gases they will cause. Moving to renewables requires large quantities of rare earth metals, the mining of which is causing huge pollution in China where 70% are extracted. Production of lithium in the Atacama desert in Chile has already destroyed salt water lakes relied on by flamingos and robbed the freshwater aquifer, destroying the farming in the region. Meanwhile 2 firms, Albemarle and SQM, blame each other for flouting the rules. Cobalt is now to be mined from the ocean floor, without understanding what this will do to the ecology of a part of the world we know precious little about – and since it is necessary for renewable energy this is supposedly to ‘save the planet’. If we need to buy new electric cars, this will no doubt sustain the car industry, but who has accounted the greenhouse gas emissions from such production?

To understand how capitalist civilisation can be so profligate with the very world on which we all depend it is necessary to understand the nature of capitalism itself.

Distorting the truth about capitalism

The Green New Deal promises to overcome capitalism’s destruction of the environment, particularly climate change, through the bourgeois state, but this is not possible. Capitalism is not a government policy whose various laws can be chosen or altered at will by a parliament, but the result of the long historical development of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production. An important step in this was the separation of the producers from their means of production, for instance when peasants were driven off the land in favour of sheep for the more lucrative woollen industry.

This created a system of generalised commodity production, production for the market. In place of peasants who could produce almost all they needed from the land, there were wage workers who needed to buy everything. The capitalists they

society. The state of planet Earth can only be improved through the overthrow of capitalism by the working class. This is not to be accomplished by a minority, no matter how determined.

As the system sinks into barbarism, time is not on the side of the working class, but the actions of campaigns like those of XR actively prolong the life of the capitalist system. A common answer by the radical ecologists to those who insist that only world revolution can overcome the problems posed by capitalism is: we don’t have time for that. But since the ideology of XR and similar ‘radicals’ is acting as a way of channelling concerns about the environment into bourgeois dead-ends, it is nothing less than a brake on the development of class consciousness and thus the potential for an authentic revolution. **Barrow, November 2019**

work for – whether an individual businessman, company, multinational or state-owned industry – are in competition to sell at a profit. The Green New Deal can do nothing to change the way capitalism works.

Capital has a real Midas touch: everything it produces must be sold at a profit if the business is to survive, everything accounted in the bottom line, regardless of what is produced. But for capital the resources of the natural world are a free gift, as Marx showed. “Natural elements which go into production as agents without costing anything, whatever role they might play in production, do not go in as components of capital, but rather as a free natural power of capital; in fact a free natural productive power of labour; but one which on the basis of the capitalist mode of production represents itself as a productive power of capital, like every other productive power.”⁶ In capitalism what costs nothing has no (exchange) value, can be used and despoiled at will. In this framework a priceless rainforest is worthless. A farmer who cuts down trees of the rainforest because he wants to plant oil palm, soya, or another crop, is forced to do so, because he can make most money with this, or even because it is the only way he can make enough to live. Within capitalism the question of an economic activity serves the needs of nature and humanity cannot be posed, only whether it is profitable.

In the 19th Century, when capital was expanding across the globe, it was already polluting and destroying nature. The pollution from mining and industry is well known, as is the history of raw sewage flowing out of large cities. The effect on the soil is less well known. “In modern agriculture, as in urban industry, the increase in productivity and the mobility of labour is purchased at the cost of laying waste and debilitating labour-power itself. Moreover, all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.”⁷ What Marx showed for the 19th Century has only worsened. Agriculture, like industry, has expanded enormously, its yields and productivity have grown on a huge scale, and the fertilisers necessary to maintain this have become a real menace to the soil and waterways.

However polluting, murderous and exploitative capitalism was while it was expanding across the globe, the period since the First World War has seen a spiral of destruction of nature, and of human life. World War 1 was followed by World War 2 and local wars backed by bigger imperialist powers have multiplied ever since. And capitalists and states were forced into sharper economic and military competition destruction of the environment has only reached new levels. Capitalist business, whether private or state run, has increased its pollution and robbery of the earth’s resources to unprecedented levels. To which we must add the pollution and destruction carried out by the military and in wars (see ‘Ecological disaster: the poison of militarism’ on our website⁸).

The danger posed to the environment, to the climate, in a word, to nature, cannot be overcome without overthrowing capitalism. The Green New Deal will be no more successful than the emissions trading scheme which tried to limit greenhouse gas emissions by market mechanisms.

6. Marx, *Capital* vol 3, Penguin books, p879

7. Marx, *Capital* vol 1, Penguin books, p638

8. <https://en.internationalism.org/content/16734/ecological-disaster-poison-militarism>

Worse, by providing a false ‘solution’ it can only spread illusions in the working class, thus prolonging the life of this system and increasing the danger that it sinks into irretrievable barbarism. **Alex, 15.11.19**

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Marxism and ecology

Indeed, a measure of capitalism’s decadence is precisely this growing gap between the potential created by the development of the productive forces – of which science is a vital part – and the way this potential is blocked and distorted by the existing social relations.

On its own even the most disinterested scientific knowledge is powerless to turn back the tide of environmental despoliation. Hence the endless warnings of concerned scientific bodies about the melting of the glaciers, the poisoning of the oceans or the extinction of species are endlessly ignored or counteracted by the real policies of capitalist governments whose first rule is always “expand or die”, whether or not these governments are ruled by crude climate change deniers like Trump or by earnest liberals and self-proclaimed socialists.

The solution to the ecological crisis – which, increasingly cannot be separated from capitalism’s irreversible economic crisis and its drive towards imperialist war – can only come about if mankind “takes back control” through the suppression of capital accumulation, with all its outward expressions, not least money, the state, and all national frontiers. Labour must emancipate itself from capitalist exploitation: the entire process of production must be organised on the basis of the needs of the producers and their long-term interaction with the rest of nature.

This is a precondition for the survival of our species. But it is also much more than that. In the last-cited passage, Engels continues: “the more this progresses the more will men not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body, such as arose after the decline of classical antiquity in Europe and obtained its highest elaboration in Christianity”.

Here Engels returns to some of the most audacious hypotheses of the young Marx about the nature of communism. Fully realised communism means the emancipation of labour not only in the sense of getting rid of class exploitation: it also demands the transformation of labour from a penance into a pleasure, the unleashing of human creativity. And this in turn is the precondition for the subjective transformation of the human species, which will “feel and know” its oneness with nature.

Such notions take us into a far-distant future. But it will only be our future if the class which embodies it, the world proletariat, is able to fight for its specific interests, to rediscover its sense of itself as a class, and to formulate a perspective for its struggles. This will mean that its immediate, defensive struggles will more and more have to incorporate the struggle against capitalist oppression and barbarism in all their forms; at the same time, it is only by fighting on its own class terrain that the proletariat can draw behind it all those layers of society who want to call a halt to capitalism’s cannibalisation of nature. The recognition that capitalism is a threat to all life on the planet will be central to this broadening of the class struggle towards a political and social revolution. **Amos 3.4.19**

Contact the ICC

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From Great Britain use uk@internationalism.org
From India use India@internationalism.org
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Marxism and ecology¹

The overwhelming consensus of serious scientific opinion is that we are already entering a global ecological catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. This is not the place to itemise all the various aspects of the disaster facing humanity, from the pollution of the sea, air and rivers to the impending extinction of innumerable of plant and animal species, culminating in the threats posed by the accelerating process of global warming. Suffice it to say that the combination of all these tendencies, if unchecked, could make the planet itself uninhabitable, and at the very least unfit to sustain a decent human existence.

It is our contention, however, that it is not enough to examine this problem through the lens of ecology, or the natural sciences, alone. To understand the underlying causes of ecological devastation, and the possibility of reversing it, we have to understand their connection to the existing social relations, to the economic system that governs the earth: capitalism. And for us that means using the only really scientific approach to understanding the structure and dynamics of human society – the method of marxism. One excellent point of departure here is Engels' 1876 essay 'The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man', an unfinished movement that has been included within a broader unfinished symphony, *The Dialectics of Nature*¹.

Engels' essay is an application of the understanding that only by looking at the human past from the standpoint of a class of labour – and of associated labour in particular – does it become possible to understand the emergence of the human species. Contrary to the mechanistic view that it is the result of the development of the human brain seen in isolation – its growth in size and complexity as the simple result of random mutations – Engels argues that in the final analysis **man makes himself**; that it is the dialectical interaction between hand and brain in the collective production of tools and the transformation of our natural surroundings which determines the "mechanical" capacities of the brain, the dexterity of the human hand, and the evolution of a specifically human consciousness. This consciousness is one in which planned, purposeful activity and cultural transmission outweighs the more instinctual actions of previous animal species.

"It goes without saying that it would not occur to us to dispute the ability of animals to act in a planned, premeditated fashion. On the contrary, a planned mode of action exists in embryo wherever protoplasm, living albumen, exists and reacts, that is, carries out definite, even if extremely simple, movements as a result of definite external stimuli. Such reaction takes place even where there is yet no cell at all, far less a nerve cell. There is something of the planned action in the way insect-eating plants capture their prey, although they do it quite unconsciously. In animals the capacity for conscious, planned action is proportional to the development of the nervous system, and among mammals it attains a fairly high level... But all the planned action of all animals has never succeeded in impressing the stamp of their will upon the earth. That was left for man².

In short, the animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve

his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction".

There is no question that humanity acquired these capacities through collective activity, through association. In particular Engels argues that the evolution of language – a prerequisite for the development of thought and of cultural transmission from one generation to the next – can only be understood in the context of a developing social connection:

"It has already been noted that our simian ancestors were gregarious; it is obviously impossible to seek the derivation of man, the most social of all animals, from non-gregarious immediate ancestors. Mastery over nature began with the development of the hand, with labour, and widened man's horizon at every new advance. He was continually discovering new, hitherto unknown properties in natural objects. On the other hand, the development of labour necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by increasing cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. In short, men in the making arrived at the point where they had something to say to each other. Necessity created the organ; the undeveloped larynx of the ape was slowly but surely transformed by modulation to produce constantly more developed modulation, and the organs of the mouth gradually learned to pronounce one articulate sound after another".

The human capacity to transform nature has brought it enormous evolutionary and historical advantages, undeniably making humanity the dominant species on the planet. From the utilisation of fire to the domestication of animals and the sowing of crops; from the construction of the first cities to the development of vast networks of production and communication that could unify the entire planet: these were the necessary stages towards the emergence of a global human community founded on the realisation of the creative potential of all its members, in other words, of the communist future which Marx and Engels predicted and fought for.

A warning against arrogant assumptions

And yet *The Part Played by Labour* is anything but an arrogant hymn to human superiority. In the footsteps of Darwin, it begins by recognizing that everything that is uniquely human also has its roots in the abilities of our animal ancestors. And above all, no sooner has Engels noted the fundamental distinction between man and animal than he issues a warning which has a very clear resonance in the face of today's ecological crisis:

"Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries. When the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests on the southern slopes, so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, and making it possible for them to pour still more furious torrents on the plains during the rainy seasons. Those who spread the potato in Europe were not aware that with these farinaceous tubers they were at the same time spreading scrofula. Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means

rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature – but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly".

In this passage, Engels provides us with a concrete example of the marxist theory of alienation, which is predicated on the recognition that, in given social conditions, the product of man's own labour can become a hostile power, an alien force that eludes his control and acts against him. Without entering into a discussion into the more remote origins of this human self-estrangement, we can say with certainty that the qualitative development of this process is linked to the emergence of class exploitation, in which, by definition, those who labour are compelled to produce not for themselves but for a class that holds the power and wealth of society in its hands. And it is no accident that the development of exploitation and of alienated labour is connected to mankind's progressive alienation from nature. The examples of "unforeseen consequences" of production that Engels provides us with in the passage just cited are taken mainly from pre-capitalist forms of class society, and it is precisely with these earlier forms of civilisation that we find the first clear example of man-made environmental disasters.

*"The first cases of extensive ecological destruction coincide with the early city states; there is considerable evidence that the very process of deforestation which allowed civilisations such as the Sumerian, the Babylonian, the Sinhalese and others to develop a large-scale agricultural base also, in the longer term, played a considerable role in their decline and disappearance"*³.

But these were, relatively speaking, local catastrophes. In contrast to previous modes of production, capitalism is compelled by its deepest inner drive to dominate the entire planet. As it says in the *Communist Manifesto*,

"The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere..."

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image".

This necessity to "globalise" itself, however, has also meant the globalisation of ecological catastrophe. For Marx, the capitalist social relation marked the high point of in the whole process of alienation, because now the exploitation of human labour is no longer geared towards a personal relation between master and servant, as it was in previous class societies, but towards the expansion and growth of a fundamentally impersonal power – "Das Kapital", or the profit system. The universal advent of production for the market and for profit means that the tendency for the results of production to escape the control of the producer has reached its ultimate point; moreover, the capitalist exploiter himself, though benefiting from the proceeds of exploitation, is also driven

3. "Capitalism is poisoning the Earth", https://en.internationalism.org/ir/63_pollution



Australian fires threaten homes

"Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature." (Engels)

by the remorseless competition for profits, and is, in the final analysis, merely the personification of capital. We are thus confronted with a mode of production which is like a juggernaut that is running out of control and threatening to crush exploiter and exploited alike.

Because capitalism is driven by the remorseless demands of accumulation (what it calls "economic growth"), it can never arrive at a rational, global control of the productive process, geared to the long-term interests of humanity. This is above all true in a period of economic crisis, where the pressure to penetrate the last untouched regions of the planet and ransack their resources becomes increasingly irresistible to all the feverishly competing capitalist and national units.

The extreme point in the alienation of the worker in the process of production is thus mirrored in the most extreme alienation of humanity from nature. In the same way that the workers' labour power is commodified, our most intimate needs and feelings seen as potential markets, so capitalism sees nature as a vast warehouse that can be robbed and ransacked at will in order to fuel the juggernaut of accumulation. We are now seeing the ultimate consequences of the illusion of ruling over nature "like a conqueror over a foreign people": it can only lead to "nature taking its revenge..." on a scale far greater than in any previous civilisation, since this "revenge" could culminate in the extinction of humanity itself.

"Taking back control"

Let's return to the last passage from Engels, where he writes that *"all our mastery of (nature) consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly"*. He goes on thus: *"And, in fact, with every day that passes we are acquiring a better understanding of these laws and getting to perceive both the more immediate and the more remote consequences of our interference with the traditional course of nature. In particular, after the mighty advances made by the natural sciences in the present century, we are more than ever in a position to realise, and hence to control, also the more remote natural consequences of at least our day-to-day production activities"*.

The paradox of capital is that while the development of science under its reign has allowed us to understand the laws of nature to an unprecedented degree, we seem increasingly powerless to "apply them correctly".

For Engels, of course, the capacity to control the consequences of our production depended on the overthrow of capitalism and the appropriation of science by the revolutionary working class. But Engels, confident that the victory of the socialist revolution was not far off, could not have foreseen the tragedy of the centuries that followed his: the defeat of the first attempt at world proletarian revolution, and the prolongation of the capitalist system that has reached such a level of decay that it is undermining the very bases for a future communist society. In the nightmare world that decadent capitalism is shaping before our eyes, scientific knowledge of the laws of nature, which could and should be used for the benefit of humanity, is more and more being enlisted to aggravate the mounting calamity, by bending it to the intensification of the exploitation of man and nature, or the creation of terrifying weapons of destruction which themselves pose a major ecological threat.

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1. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm>

2. Anthropologists, geologists and other scientists have coined the term "Anthropocene" to designate a new geological era in which man has definitely stamped his will upon the atmosphere, climate and biology of the Earth. They put forward different moments to mark this transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, some seeing the invention of agriculture as crucial, while others opting for the beginning of the industrial revolution, i.e. the beginning of the capitalist epoch, but also including a phase of considerable acceleration after 1945.

i. This article appeared on our website and in *WR* 383 with the title 'No solution to the ecological catastrophe without the emancipation of labour from capitalist exploitation'.