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The Working Class, the Environment, and Socialism

[US] Marc Brodine

Global warming is a profound symptom of the basic environmental problem humanity faces: an imbalance between human activities and the natural world on which we depend. We have to cut carbon dioxide emissions, and fast; global climate change is an escalating challenge.

However, focusing on global warming to the exclusion of related problems can lead to self-defeating policies. Oil and natural gas depletion, industrial pollution, the universal build-up of persistent organic pollutants (many of which negatively affect the human reproductive and endocrine systems), overstressed water and soil, and rapid desertification exemplify how the ability of nature to support people is being degraded. Waiting for some magical technological or “market-driven” solution wastes precious time. The longer we delay, the more costly and difficult change will be.

Humanity in general is not causing the problem. Capitalism, in addition to exploiting human labor, relies on ever-expanding markets, ever-expanding production of commodities, ever-expanding development, and ever-expanding private profit, all root causes of the imbalance with nature. Short-term, short-sighted profit as the sole measure of value underlies many of the crises which affect humanity.

The issues facing humanity require fundamental changes in how we produce food and goods, how we transport and distribute them, and how we stop depleting the soil, water, oil, forests, natural gas, and the capability of the soil, oceans, and climatic systems to absorb pollution and greenhouse gases. These issues are not primarily about individual choices; they are mostly about our major agricultural, industrial, transportation, finance, taxation, and marketing systems. At their root, they challenge the capitalist economic system.

We need social economic planning that understands the needs of nature as a fundamental limiting factor. We need an economic system that measures value by human need rather than short-term profit.

Personal decisions (like recycling), social action (organizing a union or local environmental struggle), political action (demanding that politicians act on environmental

problems), and global action (the Kyoto Accords), combined with the latest in scientific knowledge, can help correct the imbalance that threatens human survival.

Public discussion of global warming promotes education about its gravity and the need for action. However, blaming “overpopulation” or “excessive consumption” lets the capitalist system off the hook. Such approaches fail to address the underlying causes of global warming. Only a relatively few people have made the decisions causing this rapidly-developing crisis. Those were private decisions, made by capitalists and their managers, and public decisions made by governments dominated by capitalist interests.

Justice, fairness, and basic human decency are affronted by efforts to blame the global warming crisis on “too many people.” International corporations and their owners did the most to create the problem, benefit most from the way things are, and are among the main obstacles to seriously tackling change. Real solutions will hurt their bottom line and challenge their power and control.

Most people, along with the three-quarters of animal species threatened with extinction by global warming, are victims. Human victims are blamed for a profligate lifestyle, while simultaneously, corporations promote and thrive on more consumer spending, more consumer debt, and wasteful consumer behavior.

Sometimes international environmental problems are explained using gross averages, which end up concealing more than they reveal. Figures for “average per capita energy consumption” used to compare the “energy footprint” of people in different countries conceal huge class differentials in energy use and decision-making authority. The average person in the U.S. has no more of a role in deciding whether or not to build another coal-fired electricity generating plant than the average person in Indonesia plays in deciding how much of the rainforest to cut down for export. The average North American plays no more role in setting up the systems that require car use by individuals (suburbs, lack of public transportation, long commutes, the destruction of neighborhood shopping) than the average sub-Saharan African plays in setting up the systems (or lack thereof) that result in cutting down precious trees to make charcoal.

Individual consumer choice has little to do with irrigation systems that draw down the water table faster than rainfall replenishes an aquifer; little to do with the financial decisions that result in massive loans for energy industry projects; little to do with whether or not governments subsidize nuclear energy plants or more coal-fired plants, little to do with tax credits that subsidize corporate profits. Individual choice has even less to do with foreign policy towards oil-producing countries (or else the 70-to-80% of U.S. individuals who want an end to the Iraq War would have ended it already).

Approaches that blame “all of us” for environmental problems ignore class divisions, ignore the dominant role of wealth and power in governmental decision-making, ignore that financial benefits go disproportionately to the top few percent of the population, and ignore who has a vested interest in preventing change.

What happened following Hurricane Katrina proved yet again the existence of widespread poverty in the U.S., proved that government agencies often act against the interests of poor and working people, and proved that oppressed and exploited people do not share in the benefits of the U.S.'s declining "high standard of living."

The conflict is not between the "rich North" and the "poor South," it is between capitalists and rich landowners the world over on the one hand, and workers, family farmers, and poor people the world over on the other.

In any class-divided society, the rich and powerful use their wealth and power to escape the consequences of any type of crisis, including environmental crisis. They seek to place the blame and burden on workers and poor people. They seek to profit from human suffering. The rich and powerful have vested interests in continuing to profit from unsustainable agricultural and industrial processes, and from raw material-extraction that depletes non-renewable resources.

While the main emitters per capita of greenhouse gases are the U.S., Australia, Japan, and Western Europe, the main early victims are in the poorest countries. Those poorest nations are most negatively affected by capitalist resource extraction, by imperialist oppression, by the history of European colonialism, by international debt (which benefits the major capitalist banks), by changes in weather patterns and rainfall which hurt agriculture. This reality follows the centers of financial power and the pathways of international trade.

The struggles of workers to wrest power away from "employer prerogatives" parallel the struggle of citizens to wrest power away from private property prerogatives. Issues of power to save the planet from environmental devastation are issues of democratic power for the majority, meaning power for workers, their families, and poor people, who together make up the vast majority of all societies.

Economic decisions that produce pollution, environmental degradation, and reckless development are among the challenges to a sustainable balance between immediate human needs and the long-term human need for a healthy environment. The struggle to implement real solutions to environmental problems is a struggle over control of resources, of institutions, of decision-making, of production and industrial processes, of land and land-use, and over the political process. Profit for the few is the wrong measure to use to reach decisions in the interests of all. The keys to human survivability are not gross economic measures but scientific and human ones: people and nature determine sustainability, not profits.

Workers are among the first to be victimized by toxic chemicals. Workers in the factories and workplaces die, contract environmentally induced diseases, and get a double dose of pollutants—being exposed where the work and where they live. Corporations are no more hesitant to hurt their employees than they are hesitant to hurt the communities where those employees and many others live. This is not new—coal miners and their communities

have suffered severe respiratory problems for hundreds of years, and efforts to ameliorate those problems have been resisted by corporations at every step.

Workers need safe workplaces, free of toxic chemicals. They need neighborhoods and houses which minimize energy otherwise lost through bad construction, inadequate insulation, and endless commutes. They need to live free from toxic waste and industrial pollution. They need healthy, affordable food supplies that don't use chemical pesticides, don't strain water supplies, and don't rely on carbon-burning transportation over huge distances. They need to know that their children will live healthy lives in a world where all people have choices, opportunities, and democratic and economic power. Workers need to shoulder their share of the costs of change, but don't need to shoulder the share of the capitalists, their obscene conspicuous consumption, arrogant use of power, or resistance to change that challenges their "right" to make excessive profits.

Working class solutions don't limit themselves to "carbon footprints" or individual recycling. They don't rely on the market or some magical technological fix. They understand that technological improvements and solutions must go hand in hand with social and economic changes to be effective.

Real sustainability does not mean how to keep making excess profits; sustainability is about human survival at a level of advanced production and health, and requires putting people and nature before profits, something that capitalism is incapable of doing. When a few powerful capitalists enrich themselves by ignoring the need for immediate action or by obstructing positive action, it is foolish to expect them to lead or fund programs that challenge their power and wealth. Because they use wealth and power to escape the early effects of global warming, they justify and rationalize the system that provides them with superprofits.

"Solutions" which ignore the class divisions in society can at best only postpone the worst impacts of global warming and an unsustainable economic system. Capitalism is the root cause of most of the environmental problems we face, and is the biggest obstacle to real solutions. The only force which, if organized, is capable of taking power away from the rich is the working class, leading a grand alliance of all who are exploited and oppressed by capitalism.

Poverty is a major cause of high birthrates in developing countries, and capitalist globalization is a major cause of poverty: it increases income inequality and oppressive debt, distorts markets, and facilitates financial speculation. Countries with a social-democratic orientation including Holland and the Scandinavian countries have succeeded in bringing population growth under control. Countries with a socialist orientation, such as Cuba and China, have instituted policies to make family planning and contraceptive services available to all, and China's one-child policy has brought down the formerly astronomical birth rate there. The state of Kerala in India, with a communist-led government, has brought health care,

family planning, and a more equitable distribution of wealth to the population, with positive population control results.

Environmental solutions point to more social decision-making, more social control over what is produced, and over where and how it is produced, packaged, distributed, and consumed. Society's ability to implement solutions requires changes in political power, in governmental structures, in national priorities. It requires peace and international cooperation on a new level. Preemptive war, invasion and occupation, research on developing "bunker-busting" nuclear weapons, and unilateral militarization of space, are the antithesis of what humanity needs, wasting scientific and material resources.

Real solutions require taking power away from corporations, the managers who run them, and the capitalists who profit from them. These are not just economic or scientific questions, they are questions of class power, of class exploitation and oppression, of the need for democratic control of economic decisions.

Serious environmental solutions require socialism based on a scientific understanding of the need to correct the current imbalances between human productive activity and the natural systems essential for human survival. The environmental movement needs workers, needs alliances with and participation from unions—because organized workers are the only force with the potential power to wrest control of production decisions away from the capitalist class.

Greater cooperation and unity between the Communist Parties of the world is needed. A higher level of scientific and environmental awareness in the programs of these parties is necessary. Increased Communist, union, and workers participation in environmental movements is essential.

Environmental issues, like issues of nuclear war and peace, are class issues that also affect all humanity. Broad cross-class coalitions are possible. This doesn't substitute for working class leadership and organization, but brings additional strength to the movement for an environment that can sustain all humanity.

Environmental problems of socialism

Socialism, the collective ownership of and authority over the major means of production and finance, is necessary to mobilize the resources of whole societies to fund the massive changes we need to make, to change the measures of progress and development, to put people and nature before profits. Socialism is an essential aspect of the changes we need to protect the survival of our species, but it is not a sufficient condition by itself.

In the Soviet Union, a notable environmental success was the clean-up of Lake Baikal in Siberia, the largest freshwater lake by volume in the world. Paper-making plants polluted the lake. A struggle resulted in returning the lake to health, making changes in the placement of

factories, in waste disposal, and in social input into planning. Since capitalist restoration, there have been continuing struggles to keep new development away from the lake, but capitalists keep pushing for environmentally-destructive development.

Other positive Soviets examples were urban design which promoted mass transit, implementation of “green zones” around cities, and separating industrial zones from housing in many places.

The opposite is illustrated by what the Soviets did to the Aral Sea, building massive irrigation projects, dams, and canals to drain the rivers that fed the Aral Sea. Once the world’s fourth largest inland sea, it has now virtually disappeared. Water diverted to grow cotton in the desert resulted in the ground becoming inundated with salt, destroying its ability to grow cotton and creating large desert areas. A short-lived economic boom led to long-term negative consequences, destroying rather than creating value. The calculations were short-term, linear, and not dialectical or holistic.

Cuba’s environmental progress is another positive example. Cuba has the world’s most comprehensive recycling system, is engaged in innovative environmental scientific research, has transformed most agriculture to organic methods, has created more small-scale integrated farming and moved away from monoculture farming, and provides mass popular education about their island’s ecology. Cuba has, over several decades, increased the amount of the country which is forested from 15% to 25%. Cuba’s planned responses to natural disasters, such as the hurricanes which regularly hit the island, are world models. Successful experiments with urban agriculture, community health, local democratic organization, and international medical solidarity are all world pacesetters. Both Cuba and Venezuela are changing all the light bulbs in their countries to compact florescent bulbs, decreasing carbon dioxide emissions, drawing less power, and cutting energy costs—an example of the kind of social decision-making and change the world needs.

China

China illustrates the dangers when socialist planning downplays the consequences of development on nature, but also the potential of socialism to solve problems on a mass scale.

China as of yet has no comprehensive strategy for an ecologically sustainable development path, for a new socialist paradigm based on humanity’s need to let nature reproduce the natural systems we depend on. China’s development plans include truly massive irrigation projects which threaten large ecological systems, and construction of many coal-burning electricity-generating plants. Soon China will pass the U.S. as the largest producer of greenhouse emissions on the basis of total output, though still far less on a per capita basis—Australia and the U.S. hold the distinction of the highest per capita emissions. Much of China’s increasing pollution is due to industries that export to the U. S.

We don't always see the struggles going on within China, nor the positive efforts they are making, such as large-scale reforestation programs, innovations such as green rooftops, planting tree barriers to decrease wind-blown particulate matter, and efforts to at least slow desertification of agricultural land. There are many scientists and activists (including within the Chinese Communist Party) who argue for a dialectical approach to development that takes the environment into account more decisively. State policy is beginning to give more weight to environmental priorities—over \$90 billion in development projects have been rejected for environmental reasons.

China's negotiators oppose mandatory limits on carbon dioxide emissions, claiming that the need for unrestrained economic development outweighs all other factors for developing countries. However, China's official position is undergoing change, and its representatives are playing a more positive role in international climate change negotiations.

The Chinese make the correct argument that industrial development in the U.S. and western European over the last 150 years has added the most greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, and the people of China and other less-developed nations have in essence been cheated out of their share of the benefits of that development. Therefore, they argue that China, among others, should not have restrictions on its development.

There are several problems with this reasoning. It offers only two alternatives, either everybody engaging in unrestricted polluting, or some (the less-developed countries) not being subjected to any mandatory restrictions; both alternatives would defeat efforts to control greenhouse gas emissions. These are not the only two alternatives. It is possible (though difficult) to construct a sliding scale of mandatory standards which takes development levels and needs into account.

A more basic problem is that nature is letting us know in no uncertain terms that the development path which Western Europe and the U.S. took is not available to other countries, not without hurting everyone including the vast majority of people in the developing nations themselves.

Humanity needs all developing countries to take a different path to industrialization; creating more of the same will not help the Chinese people in the long term, or the people of other less-developed nations. All of humanity *also* needs the U.S. to transform its industrial production and transportation systems (if the U.S. just cut back its carbon emissions to the level of Western Europe, that would make a significant contribution to buying time for the whole world). It is not one or the other, it is both simultaneously.

We don't often see China's many smaller-scale positive projects, such as investment in mass transit and experiments with new "green" cities. If nations adopt the Chinese-developed "green GDP," that will help make clear the real costs of environmental problems. In spite of the plans to build many more coal-fired electricity-generating plants, China has committed to get 20% of its energy from renewable sources.

We don't always see that even though China is on the negative path to producing many more automobiles, they are already adhering to higher emissions standards than U.S. automakers. However, more automobiles mean more carbon dioxide emissions, more highways, roads, and parking lots, taking land away from food production, stressing energy resources more intensely, creating more pollution, causing water run-off and erosion problems, and draining resources from other kinds of construction and production.

One problem of reaching the right balance between development and sustainability is that benefits from development can occur rapidly, while the negative consequences sometimes take longer—toxic chemicals take time to accumulate and concentrate in water and soil, up through the food chain. The negative effects take time to show up in the health of people, and correctly diagnosing and addressing the underlying causes of the problem doesn't happen instantaneously. All the while, toxic chemicals continue to accumulate and impact the health of more people, making remediation more difficult and expensive.

China's economic planning could enable China to marshal the resources of the entire society to tackle social and economic environmental problems on a scale unimaginable in the capitalist U.S. If China finds ways to enforce their reasonably good environmental laws instead of letting both state-owned companies and capitalist enterprises run roughshod over these laws, that would benefit both the Chinese people and the world. If they use their power to tackle global climate challenges, China has the potential to lead the way, rather than excusing its way to making the problems worse.

The expansion of the socialist idea

While socialism makes possible the massive changes we need, there is no automatic guarantee that the right choices will be made about what to do with limited resources. We also need education, democratic inputs from popular struggles, independent environmental organizations, more scientific knowledge, and a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between land, water, weather, agriculture, industry, and society.

Unlike so-called "deep ecologists" who argue for ignoring human needs to let nature triumph, and unlike limited socialist thinking based on fallacious assumptions of "man's triumph over nature," we need a rounded, all-sided, in-depth understanding of the interrelationships between human and natural systems.

Marxist economists pay great attention to the necessary balance between production of consumer goods and production of the means of production. These concepts have to be expanded to include the restrictions of limited natural resources, the requirements of nature to not be so overloaded that it can't absorb waste products, and the necessary limits of planetary climatic systems. Planned economies need to include nature's requirements and limits in their plans.

The greatest good is *not* the greatest amount of material goods, but rather production of material goods in balance with the continual reproduction and restoration of the natural conditions we need to survive. The resources in and of nature are not infinite. We need sustainable socialist ecological development, rather than development which depletes the soil, depletes natural resources, paves over the land, and focuses on immediate gains while ignoring long-term costs.

Ultimately, problems and shortcomings of socialism represent a failure to think, research, plan, and implement dialectically and democratically. Economics and development must be based on the ability of nature to reproduce itself, must be based on maintaining a healthy balance between human needs and the needs of the natural systems humanity depends on. If development doesn't work to maintain that balance, it works against the healthy survival of humanity, and that is as true of socialist development as any other kind.

Socialism is about ending hunger and poverty, about creating health care, jobs, equality, peace, international cooperation, an end to the exploitation of human labor for private profit, and about planned social and economic development, but it must also include what is healthy for the environment. If we destroy the ability of natural systems to regenerate and recuperate, we destroy the possibility of health for humanity. We can't have healthy humanity without a healthy natural world.

While we find in Marx and Engels many references to the necessity of basing ourselves on the imperatives of the natural world, most socialist planners subordinated these to the imperatives of increased production. Where the two came into conflict, industrialization won out.

Part of that leadership is also to critique our past errors, mistakes, and limitations, such as Marxist economics divorced from the natural world. We have to understand that previous socialist ideas about boundless and ever-increasing production of goods will not work in the real world. We must merge our theory and practice with current science, with today's deeper knowledge of environmental limits, with current and future environmental limitations on extraction, production, and distribution. Misguided notions of "human triumph over nature" do not match what we now know of the limits of nature which necessarily limit human productive activity.

In the field of environmental struggle, it is the responsibility of Communists, Marxists, labor leaders, and working class activists, to participate and provide leadership. This is the unity of theory and practice—we won't get the theory right unless we are involved; it is not only "the masses" who learn in the process of struggle, it is everyone including Communists. We have a responsibility to lead not only the working class but all movements and mass organizations into action against the accelerating capitalist destruction of the environment, in our own interests and in the interests of humanity as a whole.