

Left-Horizons

Capitalism, not 'people' threatens the planet

Fifty years ago, any school chemistry text book would have said that the percentage of carbon dioxide in the air was 0.025 per cent. An accurate figure today is about 0.041 per cent, meaning that the concentration has increased by three fifths in only two generations. Despite the dogged resistance of a tiny handful, there is an overwhelming consensus among scientists now that this human-made increase in the concentration of CO₂ gas is leading to global warming through its effect on the planet's absorption and radiation of heat, the so-called greenhouse effect.

This week, the ninety-one scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) gave their most serious and stark warning yet of the dangers facing humankind. It is not an exaggeration to say that without drastic changes in methods of energy production and use, the current climatic trends may present a threat to the continuation of human civilisation on the planet. It is something to which the labour movement and the left in general (including the tradition represented by this website) gave insufficient attention in the past, and something that must be corrected in the future.

The IPCC has concluded that world governments have only 12 years to begin to make significant changes in policies, if it is to avoid "catastrophe" in terms of climate change.

Since the pre-industrial era, only 200 years ago, the average world temperature has risen by 1°C. The planet is on course for a 2°C rise by the end of this century and a further rise of up to 3°C beyond that, if there is no change in policies. A few degrees may not seem much, but they would produce catastrophic changes in climate and weather patterns. During the great ice-ages in the geological past, when at times almost all the water on the planet was frozen in glaciers, the average world temperature was as little as 5° cooler than today. Not a huge difference, in other words. One can imagine the effect of a similar temperature change in the other direction. One scientist commented that "we are more or less on a 4°C [temperature increase] pathway right now..." (*Financial Times*, October 9)

Already, the single degree increase we have experienced has been enough to produce record temperatures around the globe. In the last few years, there has been a greater frequency of hurricanes, wildfires, droughts and other anomalous weather events compared to previous years. In some cases, records going back centuries are being broken.

But this is *mild* in comparison to changes that could take place with another degree or two (or three!) of temperature rise. Drastic changes in climate and localised weather systems can produce

catastrophic changes in plant growth and crop failures on an epic scale. Much of the planet's water is locked up in glacial masses in the Antarctic and Greenland ice-sheets. Should these melt, it would result in a rise in sea-levels of 7 to 10 metres, drowning many of the world's major maritime cities, as well as entire archipelagos and coastal regions currently inhabited by hundreds of millions of people. The results would be almost incalculable.

Carbon Dioxide and Methane

Carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, is produced in the billions of tonnes by burning fossil fuels for energy – coal, oil (petrol, diesel) and gas. To shift the world economy away from the use of these fossil fuels would require a truly astronomic shift of investment, research and resources into renewable energy sources – scientists speak in terms of trillions of dollars. Unless that is done, the billions of human beings on the planet will go on burning fuels and pumping more 'carbon' into the air.

But it is not just carbon dioxide – CO₂ – that presents a problem. Methane gas – CH₄ – is also an issue. This is the natural gas that is always associated with oilfields and oil production and it is an increasingly important source of energy in itself. Methane, tonne for tonne, is twenty-five times more effective as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. In every case where methane is extracted (including by fracking) and transported through pipelines, there are leaks of thousands of tonnes into the atmosphere. Natural emissions are an even greater problem. There are over 70 billion animals bred and slaughtered for meat *every single year*. One third of the arable land on the planet is now used for cattle, including the growth of animal feed. The billions of animals that are bred for meat are responsible for about 15 per cent of all carbon emissions, roughly equivalent to the greenhouse gases produced by all the world's transportation systems put together. A policy to avoid global warming, therefore, will need to address the western world's current addiction to meat. But there are also billions of tons of methane trapped in the ocean bed, in the form of 'methyl hydrates' and in the frozen soils of northern Canada and Siberia. Western Siberia alone may contain as much as 70 bn tonnes of methane, a quarter of all the methane on the land surface of Earth. This alone is equivalent to 1.7 tr tons of carbon dioxide – in other words, more greenhouse gas than has been emitted by humans in the past 200 years.

All this methane, currently 'locked' in deep ocean or in frozen soils, could be vulnerable to release into the atmosphere, in the event that the average world climate is warmed beyond a certain 'tipping point'. Thus, should significant global warming occur, it would not follow a

gradual and smooth pattern of progress. It would be more likely to follow a 'chaotic' and unpredictable path, in which positive feedback mechanisms could produce sudden accelerations in warming, leading to cataclysmic change. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to suggest that global warming is an existential threat to human civilisation in the next couple of centuries.

What are the alternatives?

The IPCC have sounded a warning: that there needs to be a massive shift of resources towards renewable sources of energy – that is, sources that will not 'run out' over time (like coal, oil and gas) and which do not produce carbon dioxide or methane emissions. The technology for virtually unlimited renewable fuels is already present. Hydro-electric energy, wind, tidal, solar and geothermal energy are all readily used in many countries. With networks of transmission cables from one country and region to another, there is no technical reason why these sources of energy could not supply all the energy needs of the world's population, and more. The solar energy that falls on the earth exceeds the total energy consumed by human beings by a factor of over 20,000 times, so by this means alone it is likely that energy production could be guaranteed.

The question that needs to be asked, of course, is why this has not been done sooner and why it is still not being done now. This is a question that needs to be directed particularly at those supporters and members of 'Green' parties and environmental organisations that campaign on climate change. We would say to such activists that we do not doubt your sincerity and your integrity or your genuine aim of saving the planet. But what we do challenge is your strategy.

The issue of the environmental degradation of the planet is not separate and somehow 'above' other politics, but an essential element within it. The problem facing humankind is not a technological one: it is political and social. It is not humanity *in general* that is leading the planet to destruction; it is *capitalism*, an economic system based on greed, profit, exploitation, short-sightedness and a complete absence of any rational planning. It is a *class* question and there is only one class in society that has an historic interest in the destruction of capitalism and changing society. For generations, the powerful economic interests of big business – particularly in modern times the automotive and oil sectors – have completely controlled governments around the globe. This political control is still largely intact and today is the main obstacle to any fundamental change of direction in energy policy. Exxon/Mobil, Shell, BP, Chevron – oil giants like these have more influence than countries and governments and they are an absolute barrier to change.

We already live in an age of austerity, brought about by the collapse of the banking arm of the profit system ten years ago and this has brought with it a sea-change in attitudes and political consciousness. The 'old' politics is being challenged in every country on the planet. Adding to this, the effects of global warming, through natural disasters and food crises, will work their way through the political and economic system, adding even more instability and volatility to political events. It is up to the labour and socialist movement to find a way out of the political, social and economic chaos that impends. We would say to Green and environmental activists that they should join with us, become a part of the labour movement, to fight for a

new order of society and a new way of managing the science, resources and human skills we have – in a planned and rational way. But as the old saying goes, 'you cannot *plan* what you do not *control*, and you *cannot* control what you do not *own*'.

In the same week that the IPCC report was released, the Tory government has announced a relaxation of the safety rules relating to fracking, so that the companies doing the fracking can carry on and ignore earthquakes below a certain magnitude. This shows quite clearly that Tory energy policy, such as it is, is dictated by the needs of their friends in business. Fracking, of course, will release more methane to escape into the atmosphere and will lead to more fuel burned and more carbon dioxide emissions.

The boss of Shell spoke this week referred to the many technological changes needed to tackle climate change, saying that although it is "do-able" technically, "it would not be commercially viable without changes to government policies and regulations." Shell's core business, he explained, "is and will be for the foreseeable future, very much in oil and gas." Shell, in other words, owes a greater allegiance to its shareholders than to the billions of inhabitants of Planet Earth.

Socialist plan of production

We have to be clear, therefore. A strategy to save the planet, must involve a coordinated approach to research, investment and all economic activity. That means an integrated transport policy, a shift to renewables and a transformation over time even in the agriculture and food industries. None of these things are possible as long as the major industries (and, we would add, the banks) are the property of and are managed in the interests of a tiny part of the population which is the shareholding minority. The expropriation and public ownership of the giant food, energy, engineering, mining, banking and other monopolies is not an *optional* pathway, but the *only* way in which the resources, skills and manpower of the planet can be used in a rationale way.

We are not in the business of destroying livelihoods. When the Tories destroyed the British mining industry – and much of steel, engineering and shipbuilding along with it – they left entire communities devastated and without alternative employment. Many of those communities have still not recovered today. The labour movement, even carrying through an environmentally-based economic policy, must preserve jobs and livelihoods until good alternatives are guaranteed. It is absolutely correct that the Labour Party leadership has committed itself to the development of a multi-billion renewable energy industry, but that can only be a beginning.

Socialists must fight inside the Labour Party for a thorough-going policy of socialist transformation and the abolition of the so-called 'free market' economy. Rational planning is the only hope of saving the planet and that is something that is predicated upon socialist change. It is no longer a case, as Leon Trotsky put it in the 1930s, of 'socialism or barbarism'. It is now a case of 'socialism or the destruction of humanity'.

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