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Mutual Aid and Solidarity against Crisis

Green Syndicalist Reflections on COVID-19

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2020

Environmental Politics Group

theanarchistlibrary.org

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cial relations to stop destroying nature, and human communities, while meeting human needs equitably, and the emerging examples of mutual aid and solidarity toward those ends, is a needed counter to the exterminism of ecofascism and Wall Street pundits alike.

It took only a matter of weeks for politicians and political pundits to openly muse about the death calculus that should be undertaken to determine how many should die to “save the economy,” or more precisely to restore profits to owners and investors. Shutdowns and isolation might be good for people and the planet but were not so great for capital accumulation. It turns out capital does not care if people or the planet die, as long as the Dow goes up. Pretenses have been shed, the core of the system is on display.

System Problems

The COVID-19 crisis has shown the contradictions in a society in which workers produce enormous value (tasks, services, products, care) that they do not control or have access to and which is hoarded by capital. It also shows that those who labor do not even control decision-making over their labors.

It has raised, powerfully, issues of wealth redistribution, reoriented production (making ventilators and medical supplies might be more important than cars and tanks), and the necessity of egalitarian access to essential goods and services (housing, health care, food, etc.).

The crisis has also shown that long-needed policy actions, like housing homeless people, income assistance or guaranteed income, universal access to medical care, can actually be implemented surprisingly quickly and directly—at least with greater facility than we have been told. That they have not been is not a matter of lack of resources or funds but because of political preferences and lack of will. Governments had simply decided not to do it previously (even as crises like homelessness expanded).

Mutual Aid and Solidarity Under COVID-19

Perhaps most significantly for thinking about moves to a post-COVID ecological future have been the inspiring mobilizations of mutual aid and solidarity as people have organized to support their neighbors and communities. From groups preparing meals and care packages of essentials (toilet paper, sanitizer, soap, etc.), tents and clothing drops for homeless people, impressive examples of social solidarity have helped to overcome some of the alienation and individualism of habitual life under capitalism and show the connectedness needed to change things more positively.

We have also seen organizing for rent strikes as people collectively challenge the obscenity of landlords demanding rent (even as governments have offered mortgage relief for owners) while people are without work.

The shutdowns resulting from the COVID-19 crisis have shown the importance of work often devalued socially. The crisis has made it clear that garbage collectors, bus drivers, grocery store workers, delivery drivers, and teachers are essential to the proper maintenance of society. CEOs, investment bankers, landlords, speculators are of no purpose.

Green Syndicalism

Green syndicalism, meshing radical ecology with radical labor organizing, is an approach to social ecology that stresses connections between the destruction of nature and exploitation of the working class, the domination of Indigenous people and territories, as rooted in production for profit and private accumulation. Both ecological justice and social justice require a participatory reorientation of production and exchange based on collective needs, not profit.

It is not all of humanity that is the virus, as some narratives have gone, it is a system that uses up nature and the labors of working people to enrich financially small numbers who claim ownership over both land and labor.

COVID-19 has opened a view into the social impacts of ecological crisis which will be magnitudes greater as climate crisis grows—and if there is a push for a “return to normal.” It reinforces that the impacts are felt unequally—by poor, Indigenous, working class people—not by billionaires. It shows that resources that are produced collectively and socially must be shared collectively and socially.

Green syndicalism stresses the skills that working class people have, as the ones who do the work, in reorienting production toward ecologically and socially just and sustainable practices. One example in Canada has been tar sands workers calling for a shut down of the tar sands and advocating for reclamation, cleanup, and restoration work (which, as well, means more work over a longer period of time). Guided by the Indigenous communities whose territories are being destroyed.

Some have already connected these dots and there have been calls for a general strike already. #GeneralStrike was the top trend on social media for a couple of days in mid-March. And some strikes have happened, including actions by services workers and delivery drivers (such as Amazon and Purdue Farms workers).

Perhaps a more telling example occurred when miners walked out at Hudbay’s Lalor mine in northern Manitoba over their COVID-19 concerns after contractors were flown into town after the town council had requested that the company suspend air travel into the region.

Some Indigenous communities in British Columbia (unceded territories) set up blockades to stop tourists from entering their territories during the crisis.

Green syndicalism, an emphasis on the industrial capitalist causes of ecological crises and the possibilities of reorienting so-