

# **Rio Earth summit**

**Does 'saving the planet' mean an end to industry, progress and development?**

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**The earth Summit took place in Rio last June. In spite of the enormous cost (\$123 million) and publicity (8,749 media people.) the final results were two weak treaties and the agreement of some “principles” on the environment. Even this was too much for America who refused to sign the Bio-Diversity Treaty, fearing for their bio-technology industry. In Rio itself an estimated 700 “street children” have been murdered since January (according to the Centre for the Mobilisation of Marginalised Populations) in an attempt to beautify the city.**

Once again the capitalists proved unwilling to tackle the problems of under-development and environmental degradation. Given their past record this doesn't come as much of a surprise. However there are serious problems and it would be wrong for socialists and anarchists to down-play them. For example, according to the World Bank's World Development Report for 1992 well over one billion people in the so-called developing nations suffer from water-borne diseases and more than 3.5 million children a year die from diarrhoea alone. Despite the collapse of Stalinism arms spending has increased from \$680 billion in 1972 to an estimated \$800 billion this year, the rainforests are being cut down at a rate of 170,000 square kilometres per year with an estimated loss of 50–100 forest species every day.

## **The eve of destruction?**

Things are clearly pretty bad. Many would point to pollution, soil degradation, de-forestation and species loss and say we are experiencing a devastating crisis. Some even say that the end is nigh. Are things really this bad?

Firstly, if you look back it is possible to see where such doomsday pictures were painted in the past but we survived. In the 1930s ten record warm years in a row combined with increasing carbon-dioxide concentrations led to fears of major global climate changes. Sound familiar? The 1940s-1970s then proved on average to be much cooler than expected. This is not to knock the research of scientists like those on the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Control who believe we are experiencing a greenhouse effect. However it must be borne in mind that climate and ecological systems are extremely complex and to be wary of simple doomsday scenarios.

In 1972 a book was published by scientists in the 'Club of Rome' called "Limits to Growth". In this they argued that key resources such as lead, copper and aluminium were about to run out. Of course they didn't. In the recently published sequel "Beyond the Limits" the scientists admit they were totally wrong. They admit they should never have used the "if present trends continue" type argument. The only thing that is certain about trends is that they rarely do! We weren't on the eve of destruction then. We aren't now, though we do face serious problems.

## **Over-production?**

However the question is still raised by a lot of people concerned with the environment: are we over-developed and over-producing? For example, at the "alternative" Earth Summit in Rio a demand was issued for "a cut in the North's consumption of resources and an immediate transformation of technology to create ecological sustainability in the North". Is the problem one of over-production and consumption in the industrialised countries?

We would argue that there is a problem of over-production in capitalism. But it is not real over-production. Simply that it is an enormously wasteful system of production geared purely towards competition and profit. Huge amounts of goods are made to break as soon as possible, rubbish is sold by advertising, new inventions which threaten monopoly positions are bought out as fast as possible to stop their production (the oil companies are notorious for this). A lot of production is geared purely to maintaining a competitive advantage.

Often more is produced than there is a market demand for. Then the price collapses and recession follows. This might not mean that too much had been produced for peoples' needs. Oh, no! All it means is that more has been produced than can be bought.

So in America, one of the richest countries in the world, 36 million people (15% of the population) were living in poverty in 1991 according to Business Week. Worldwide in 1991 there were 200 million tons of grain hoarded to preserve prices. The charity Trocaire estimated that 3 million tons could have eliminated starvation in Africa for that year.

## **Arrested Development**

Imperialism is one of the ways the capitalists try to eliminate some of the contradictions involved in apparent over-production followed by recession. It is a system where certain countries are kept at a very low level of development by other well-developed capitalist nations. During booms they can buy up labour and raw materials cheaply. They can also off-load huge amounts of generally inferior products onto these countries to delay price collapse and recession.

Imperialism is not a thing of the past. The Gulf War proved that the imperialists will go to any lengths, including massive use of force, to maintain their power. At the Summit the so-called developing nations of the South asked for \$40 billion to implement the Bio-Diversity Treaty. They received just \$1 billion. Even \$40 billion is but a small fraction of their indebtedness to Western banks and governments.

These countries pay twice as much in debt re-payment as they ever get from development 'aid'. Most so-called 'aid' usually has a cost: total compliance to the wishes of the donor government. In fact most governmental development aid is used as a tool to keep the imperialised countries in line. 93% of the USA's aid budget goes to Israel where it certainly isn't used for humanitarian purposes!

## **Chemical Prospecting in Costa Rica**

When the West's rulers moan about the loss of bio-diversity they are generally worried about potential drugs and other new products they wish to extract, refine and make a profit from. Costa Rica has already signed "chemical-prospecting" agreements with Western pharmaceutical companies. Malaysia tries to sell hardwood products and, indeed, some renewable forest products on the world market. The West charges massive tariffs on finished products but virtually nothing on raw materials which they can process themselves. Other countries like Brazil are so massively burdened with debt they are almost entirely committed to deforestation and disastrous industrial and ranching projects to try and earn foreign currency.

Another example of how imperialism works is in the locating of polluting industry. 12% of the total cost of building a chemical plant in the USA is made up of pollution controls, 6% in Ireland

and presumably even less in the third world. So industry that wouldn't be tolerated in the West moves into third world countries. For this reason, when fighting to prevent location in countries like Ireland it is important to try to move beyond the "not in our back-yard" syndrome. You have to try to make links internationally.

The basic point is that capitalism is not committed to development. In fact it is based on arresting the development of most of the world which in turn contributes to environmental degradation.

## **Possible worlds**

Progress and development are not the problem. Even severely distorted and uneven (e.g. confined to the West) as they are at present they still seem to point to a better future. The possibility of freeing humanity from poverty and drudgery exists. In the seventeenth century average life expectancy in the West was 40 years, now it's 75. Access to education, leisure time and a generally better standard of living has been made possible.

Most people in the West like the improvement and wouldn't wish their grandparents' or great grandparents' lifestyle on anyone. Our aim must be to extend the possibilities, to widen peoples' experiences and expectations. Under capitalism we see the potential for a better way of life but the system can't deliver. It offers the promise of improvement with one hand but snatches it away with the other.

## **The Anarchist Alternative: drop the pilot**

The problems aren't due to unbridled development. In fact in most of the world development is urgently needed. We can't afford to go back but it is impossible to move forward under capitalism. Therefore we argue for the overthrow of capitalism. We make the case for anarchism and workers' management of industry. We need growth which is finely tuned, highly developed and responds to peoples' needs.

For now, we focus on immediate action by workers to address the issue where it arises. Environmental degradation is a class issue. The working class always gets the worst effects, the bosses can retreat to the air-conditioned penthouse or the golf-links. We support action to reduce pollution from industrial plants or even for their re-location while attempting to avoid just making "not in our back-yard" arguments.

In Britain it took industrial action by the National Union of Seamen to stop nuclear dumping at sea, they just refused to do it even when threatened with legal action. Similarly dockers in Liverpool stopped the importation of toxic chemicals from Canada.

Workers can, in day-to-day struggle, make real gains in forcing industry to clean up. They have also proved capable of managing highly centralised and complex industries in a democratic way. The experience of Russia (1917–1921), Spain (1936–37), Hungary (1956) and Portugal (1974) support this case.

Workers can make industry something which can ensure a better world and begin the massive task of development that is needed worldwide. This is the only way that resources can be used sustainably and the problems of poverty and under-development tackled. Industry has to be made work for people not profits.

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