

The burning issue

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

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Each year, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere increases. Polar ice melts to an unprecedented degree. The Great Barrier Reef suffers worse and more frequent bleaching events. Droughts lengthen. Record breaking floods hit Pakistan. Unprecedented heatwaves bake China, Europe, India, West Asia or Australia. A polar vortex diverts icy storms deep into North America. And, behind the year-to-year variations, the global temperature trend climbs ever higher.

This is climate change. And what we're seeing is only the beginning. Even if an emergency transition is begun today, the planet will become a good deal hotter before it starts cooling. Scientists warn that every fraction of a degree of warming beyond 1.5°C increases the risk of setting off runaway global warming that would wreck all known ecosystems, kill 80 to 90% of the human population and destroy industrial civilisation. This is the burning issue of our time. The fate of the biosphere and, within it, the human race, is in the hands of the people alive today.

In response to the growing threat of climate change and the inaction of capitalist governments, a great social movement has arisen. Millions are taking action to stop green house emissions. Unfortunately, the movement has no effective strategy. People's energy is being directed into activities that are only part-solutions, marginally effective or sometimes even counter-productive.

The problem: capitalism

Capitalism is the fundamental cause of climate change and the sooner we get rid of it, the easier it will be to eliminate greenhouse emissions and begin restoring a sustainable climate. Some major global capitalist industries are based on the production or consumption of fossil fuels, having two consequences.

Firstly, powerful countries, huge corporations and many billionaires have large fossil fuel investments protect. Even if they also invest in renewable energy, they would lose money by, for example, shutting a coal mine which still has coal that can be profitably extracted. The same goes for corporations reliant on consuming fossil fuels. A rapid switch to electric vehicles would make Ford's existing factories write-offs and force it to build EV factories decades before they are planned, purely to prevent its competitors taking its market share.

The second consequence is perhaps even more powerful. A political decision that huge corporations have to close down and billionaires be forced to write off their fortunes would be a terrifying example that threatens all capitalist corporations. The market must always rule and, while it may be tweaked, it can under no circumstances be made subordinate to the general good. If trillion-dollar corporations can be sent to the wall because society needs it, what capitalist is safe from having their fortune confiscated?

An additional consideration is more basic and applies to the entire relationship between capitalism and the environment, well beyond climate change. This is that capitalism is addicted to endless growth and can't survive in a situation where humanity has to live within planetary limits. This slows the efforts of those capitalists who do want to stop climate change and creates ever-more-frequent crises through habitat destruction, resource depletion and environmental pollution.

Current strategies

Until recently, the most common demand of the climate movement was for a carbon price. Set a ceiling on emissions, reduce it by a predictable amount each year and let market actors buy and sell credits to allow the market to find the least-cost path to decarbonisation. The political strategy which goes with this is electoral – vote in a government which will price carbon. This is total neo-liberalism and would force the price of decarbonisation onto the shoulders of those least able to bear the burden. The rich can continue their high carbon footprint lifestyles because they can afford it, while kids have to wear clothes they've grown out of because their working class parents spend all their money on petrol for driving to work.

We saw how this plays out in Australia a decade ago. The Labor Government and the Greens in 2010 introduced a carbon price, but they were crucified by the reactionary press for it. Their neo-liberal strategy drove the working class into the arms of the climate deniers and brought Labor to a heavy defeat. In short, carbon pricing can't work. If it doesn't have holes in it that negate its ostensible purpose, it will be politically unviable.

More recently, the movement has shifted to demanding that fossil fuel production be shut down. Usually, this is framed as a demand for no new coal or new gas. As an immediate demand it is inadequate (most existing reserves have to stay in the ground, too, to preserve a liveable climate). It is also, though, a threat to the jobs of workers in fossil fuel industries and the existence of communities reliant on them. As a coal mine is worked out, it is often replaced by a nearby one, sometimes operated by the same company.

This tactic is advanced electorally by the same people previously arguing for a carbon price, but it is also attracting supporters of more militant tactics. Here in Australia, we have Blockade Australia, while Britain has seen the emergence of Extinction Rebellion and, this year, Just Stop Oil. Direct action movements have emerged in Germany, the United States and Canada as well. All of them have come under heavy police and government repression, even the dogmatically pro-police XR. The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group opposes all police repression against environmental groups. We are especially incensed at the campaign of police persecution and lies against Blockade Australia over a botched police operation in June this year and call for all charges to be dropped.

The MACG's issue with Blockade Australia and similar organisations overseas isn't that their disruptive tactics go too far. Instead, we think they don't cause anywhere near enough disruption. A network of small secretive affinity groups can only cause minor and sporadic interruptions to the corporations destroying the planet. Furthermore, the activists are targeted with massive penalties which far outweigh the impact of their actions. We support these protestors, because at least they're doing something, but this isn't how the movement will win. A better strategy is needed.

Class struggle

The people best placed to stop the capitalist death machine in its tracks are the people who keep it going on a day-to-day basis: the working class. When workers organise in the workplace to fight for their interests, they threaten the power of capital at its source. And when workers understand their power to fight, they can lift their heads and look at the uses their employers

make of their labour. When it comes to climate change, the workers who are necessary for fossil fuels to be produced, transported and consumed are the ones who can stop it.

Working class action to stop climate change would have very different dynamics from the current movement. Instead of small groups of martyrs for the cause, we'd see workers acting en masse and being protected from police retaliation by sheer strength of numbers. The action would also dodge the trap of "jobs vs the environment" that the capitalist media love to set up, because the workers would be fighting for a Just Transition they designed themselves.

This program of class struggle is not a fairy tale. Instead, it's the only possible path forward. And it is possible, as demonstrated by the Green Bans of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation in the 1970s. Workers can and do take up radical social issues, provided it is an extension of the fight against the bosses. The Green Bans weren't imposed by workers who sacrificed their material interests, but by workers who fought for and won big wage rises, shorter hours and much improved health and safety.

The unions in Australia today are a shadow of their former selves, led by cowards whose main job is to police their members to ensure that unions aren't fined out of business by the vicious anti-union laws. This needs to be turned around completely before workers will consider fighting for a Just Transition – but also for workers to defend working conditions, maintain health and safety and be adequately compensated for the inflation that is now ripping through the economy and devastating real wages. And to do that, we need to take on the union bureaucracy and beat them.

Stopping climate change therefore requires re-building the unions in Australia from the ground up, in the teeth of opposition from the union officials and the entire capitalist class. The struggle for the environment is the same as the struggle for workers' immediate issues. So environmentalists who are members of the working class should join their union and start organising.

GREEN BANS FOR A JUST TRANSITION

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