

The Working Class Stake in the Fight Against Global Warming

Tom Wetzel

22 August 2023

Contents

The Basis of the Environmental Crisis	3
The Working Class Ecological Interest	6
Unionism as a Source of Resistance	6
Does the Global Warming Fight Conflict with Worker Interests?	7
From Resistance to Liberation	8
Being “Realistic”	9

I'm going to suggest here that the working class has a unique role to play in the fight against global warming because the owning and managing classes have interests that are tied to an economic system that has an inherent tendency towards ecological devastation whereas the working class does not.

In its "Code Red for Humanity" warning in 2021, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said: "The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse-gas emissions from fossil-fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk. Global heating is affecting every region on Earth..." With wreckage from intensifying storms and people dying from heat waves, it might seem that *everyone* has a stake in the project of ecological sustainability, and bringing a rapid end to the burning of fossil fuels. As we know, however, various sectors of the owning and managing classes pursue profits from fossil fuel extraction, refining, and burning fossil fuels. They protect sunk investments in fossil fuel-based infrastructure (like gas burning power plants) or propose highly implausible strategies (like carbon capture and storage). Thus many sectors of the top classes in our society are a roadblock to ecological sustainability.

The working class, on the other hand, have a stake in the fight for a livable future, and also have the potential power to do something about it. The working class is a large majority of the society, and thus has the numbers to be a major force. Their position in the workplace means workers have the potential to organize and resist environmentally destructive behaviors of the employers.

The Basis of the Environmental Crisis

There is a fundamental problem here: The dynamics of capitalism have an inherent tendency towards ecological devastation. To understand why this is so, we need to look at how firms are constantly searching for ways to minimize their expenses. This is how they ensure the firm can make the maximum in profits. Because capitalism is made up of relatively autonomous firms, they are in competition. If a firm doesn't continuously seek ways to make profits, they won't be able to expand their business, move into new markets, invest in new technology. Other firms will out-compete them. And minimizing expenses is central to the pursuit of profits. Thus minimizing expenses is central to survival for the capitalist firms. And to do this, firms do cost-shifting at the expense of both workers and the environment.

First, companies try to keep compensation to workers as low as they can get away with. They may look to cut taxes that support services working class people rely on. They try to find new forms of technology or new ways to organize the work that reduces the number of worker hours it takes to produce a unit of output. They might automate a production operation with robots, or they will seek ways to intensify work through "lean production" methods. For example, they'll use computer tracking of a warehouse worker picking items for an order so that they have no rest time after finishing an order but are pushed to a new task through computer control. Work intensification and computer monitoring puts workers under more stress which can have damaging health effects over time. This means the employers are imposing a human cost on workers. If workers in a furniture factory are constantly breathing in finishes or paints being sprayed on furniture in the open, or electronics assemblers are breathing in solder fumes, these are also cases where capital is shifting costs onto workers. And these are cases where the costs

could be avoided. For example, there are soldering tools that have a vacuum to suck off solder fumes so workers don't breathe it, but a firm may not want to pay the expense of installing that equipment. These are examples of how the capitalist mode of production tends to shift costs onto workers.

Second, emissions into the air and water are another form of cost-shifting. A utility firm may burn coal to generate electricity. This creates emissions that damage the respiratory systems of people in the region and also contributes to global warming. But the power firm is not required to pay anything for these damages. These costs to others from emissions are "external" to the market transaction between the power firm and its customers who pay for electricity. This is an example of a "negative externality." Externalities are a pervasive feature of the capitalist mode of production. The fossil fuel industry generates many "negative externalities." Fracking operations insert chemicals underground which can pollute the underground water sources. A large gas field or leaky oil refinery will generate large amounts of volatile organic compounds – including carcinogens and endocrine disruptors. Studies of gas fields show effects in the surrounding area such as goat herds and barn cats losing the ability to have viable offspring, due to the endocrine disruptors. Gas fields also contribute to global warming by leaking large amounts of methane. Contrary to gas industry claims, gas power plants contribute as much as coal-fired power plants to global warming due to all the methane leaks.

You'll notice here that I'm focusing on how environmental devastation is rooted in *production* – not consumption. Some environmentalists try to suggest that we should understand the global warming problem by looking at consumption practices, and they use ideas like a person's "carbon footprint" to focus on personal consumption. But consumers of electric power don't have control over the decisions of power firms on the methods of electricity generation, or what technology firms rely on to move cargo around in the global supply chains.

Another useful concept here is *throughput*. The throughput of production consists of two things: (1) All the material extracted from nature for the production process, and (2) all the damaging emissions ("negative externalities") from the production process. In addition to the damaging emissions into the air and water, capitalism is an extractivist regime with a long history of land-grabbing to minimize expenses – as in the US government handing over mineral wealth to mining companies, lands for commercial ranching and extraction of logs and wood debris from forests for the lumber and paper industries. The search for short-term profits can lead to unsustainable practices such as clear-cutting of forests or use of huge nets to scarf up all the fish in a coastal region without regard to the future of that fishery.

With the concept of throughput, we can define a concept of *ecological efficiency*. If a production process is changed in ways that reduce the amount of damage from emissions (or amount of extracted resource) per unit of human benefit, then that change improves ecological efficiency. And here is a basic structural problem of capitalism: It has no inherent tendency towards ecological efficiency. If nature is treated as a free dumping ground for wastes, there will be no tendency to minimize damaging emissions per unit of human benefit from production. Also, there will be no tendency to minimize materials extracted from nature except to the extent firms have pay for these resources.

A production system that could generate increasing ecological efficiency would tend towards reductions in pollution and resource extraction. This would require a non-profit, non-market type of eco-socialist economy where production organizations are held socially accountable – required to systematically internalize their ecological costs. Capitalism's tendency to ever greater

environmental devastation happens because firms have an incentive to *not* internalize their costs, but dump them on others.

The devastation wrought by the cost-shifting dynamic of capitalism is not limited to global warming. Capitalism has favored the evolution of agricultural practices that aim at highest output at lowest financial cost to the firm. Intense competition has led to ever-greater concentration in ownership of farm land. The capitalist setup allows the growers to rely on labor contractors to pay laborers as little as possible and get rid of workers who try to organize. Growers often own lands in various locations and pursue different crops to minimize their risks. With encouragement from the chemical industry, growers have adopted industrial production of a single crop in a large field with increasing usage of pesticides and inorganic fertilizer over time. Inorganic fertilizers typically provide some mix of nitrogen, phosphorus and calcium. Over-use of these fertilizers has led to excessive runoff, polluting water courses and leading to ocean “dead spots” around the mouths of rivers. Destructive effects on fisheries is thus one of the negative externalities from capitalist agriculture.

Since World War 2 chemical pesticide production world-wide grew from 0.1 ton to 52 million tons in 1976 and 300 million tons in 2015. Pesticides produced by the chemical industry are damaging to the health of farm workers, and pollutes water courses, and leaves residues on food. Pesticide overuse also destroys the natural predators of insects and breeds pesticide-resistant pests. This leads a kind of agricultural arms race as more and more pesticide is needed. As Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams report in *Creating an Ecological Society*, pesticides also reduce “presence in the soil of organisms that stimulate plants to produce chemicals to defend themselves.”

As with pesticides the chemical industry has also vastly pumped up the production of petroleum-based plastics which do not biodegrade but end up as vast scourge of pollution in the oceans. Plastic bags have grown in use because they take a lot less energy to produce than paper bags, and thus cost less. Production has increased from less than 5 tons in 1950 to over 340 million tons by 2014, according to the Plastics Europe trade association. At least a third of all plastic produced is not recaptured, but mostly ends up in the ocean where it is destructive to living organisms. The plastics industry does not have to pay for the negative effects on living things in the oceans.

If we bring in our definition of *throughput*, pollution and dumping of wastes are one aspect, but we need to also look at the destructive extractivist tendencies in capitalism, such as clear-cutting of forests or over-fishing. According to a 2003 study, “90 percent of all large fishes have disappeared from the world’s oceans in the past half century,” since the onset of industrial fishing with huge nets in the 1950s. “Whether it is yellowfin tuna in the tropics, bluefin in cold waters, or albacore tuna in between, the pattern is always the same. There is a rapid decline of fish numbers,” according to Ransom Myers, a fisheries biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax. To address the problem, many countries have banned long drift nets and untended longlines, and have instituted elaborate systems of licensing, and have instituted quotas and third party observers working on boats. Nonetheless, capitalist fishing outfits frequently ignore or evade these rules.

The Working Class Ecological Interest

The working class has a distinct class interest in ecological sustainability which puts the working class at odds with capital. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Workers often bare the brunt of the effects of pollution and global warming. For example, the increase in wild fires means fire-fighters are affected by breathing the smoke. Transport workers such as truck drivers are subjected to intense heat in cabs as employers refuse to provide air-conditioning.
- The cost-shifting dynamic which is the fundamental cause of global warming and environmental devastation is also destructive to workers in various ways: stress from work intensification, inadequate safety standards, refusal to acknowledge health impacts such as lung disease caused by dust in work environments, polluting emissions from industry that flow into nearby working class neighborhoods, and chemical exposures such as poisoning of farm workers with pesticides and herbicides. This gives workers an interest in pushing back against this dynamic.
- The capitalist search for minimizing expenses also leads to damaging extractivist practices in the search for short-term profits. For example, practices damaging to worker health in mining and smelting industries, over-fishing with huge nets that scarf up everything in an area of the ocean or clear cutting of forest lands — practices that undermine the long term employment in fisheries and forestry. Workers in these industries have a stake in more sustainable practices.
- The long-term damage from the increased cooking of the earth is a threat to humanity in general. So why a specific working class interest? The problem is the sunk investments the capitalists have in fossil fuel reserves, electrical generating facilities and other equipment that relies on burning of fossil fuels. This leads major sectors of capital to drag their feet against the rapid technological conversion that is needed. Moreover, recognizing the source of the global warming crisis in the normal functioning of the marketized capitalist economy with its cost-shifting dynamic is seen as a threat to the capitalist regime. The working class does not have this kind of stake in defending capitalism.

Unionism as a Source of Resistance

The working class has a direct stake in building resistance to employer power over us in the workplaces. In other words, workers have an interest in the struggle over the control of production. To the degree workers can build power in this struggle — through the building of unions and collective worker campaigns and actions that resist management — this power can also be used also to resist the environmentally destructive actions and policies of the employers. Green unionism is a logical expression of the distinct working class ecological interest.

The working class is the majority of the society and our work is essential for continuing profits flowing to the employers. As such workers have potential power to resist environmentally damaging practices of the employers. We can already see forms of this emerging as time goes on.

As I write these lines, the members of the United Electrical Workers Union at the Erie Locomotive Works of Wabtec (formerly owned by GE) are on strike. They are demanding a re-instatement of their right to strike over grievances during the life of their labor agreement. But they are also demanding that the company work with them in shifting to the production of green locomotives. This would include more efficient diesel-electric engines that produce fewer emissions as well as battery-operated electric engines to do switching in yards.

The struggle for lower transit fares in Germany in March was backed by both the climate “Fridays for the Future” protests and the German transit worker union, which supported the demand in its one-day warning strike seeking higher pay for transit workers. “We’re standing side-by-side with Fridays for Future,” said Mathias Kurreck of the union that represents public transport transit workers.

This past June fishing industry workers on Spanish and French fleets fishing on the African coast went on strike. According to the Guardian, “in an unprecedented action involving 64 vessels and roughly 2,000 crew from Senegal and Ivory Coast, 80% of the EU fleet in the Gulf of Guinea and the Indian Ocean went on strike.” The EU had allowed the Spanish and French fleets to hire West African workers for the grueling work on the ships, which were fishing for highly valuable tropical tuna. But the fleets were paying very low wages (as little as \$54 a week) and were violating EU rules for sustainable fishing. Observers who collect data on the catch were often missing. The workers were protesting against the over-fishing practices which would damage the sustainability of the West African fishery. The huge Spanish tuna fishing outfit Albacora SA, in particular, has been named by the Financial Transparency Coalition as one of the top ten companies engaged in illegal fishing practices.

These are all examples of green unionism in practice.

Does the Global Warming Fight Conflict with Worker Interests?

Some people argue for a conflict between protecting jobs and protecting the environment, and thus a conflict between the struggle for environmental sustainability and worker interests. If coal mines are shut down or fracking is banned, don’t workers lose jobs? To reply to this, we have to look at the larger picture — a picture that takes account of the damage to worker health from capitalist practices, the immense potential damage from global warming, and the jobs that will open up under a green transition.

The loss of jobs is indeed a threat from closures of polluting industries. But this is where the demand for a “Just Transition” comes into play. This phrase was first coined by Tony Mazocchi — an official of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. This is the idea that the cost of the shift away from polluting industries should not be borne by the workers in those industries, through the loss of their jobs, or lower pay in “green” projects. If fracking is shut down, or refineries are scaled back or coalmines are shut down, comparable incomes or jobs for those workers should be guaranteed. If there is going to be a shift to “green” energy projects, we need to make sure that there is a union presence in these jobs, and avoid this being just a new low-wage sector where capitalists can profit off “green” slogans. As I write, this conflict is playing out in the struggle between the United Auto Workers Union and the major auto companies over the conditions and compensation associated with electric vehicle and battery manufacturing. A major fight will be necessary to make the “Just Transition” an actual reality.

The idea of the “Just Transition” is an application of the principle of class solidarity. Just as the working class in general has a stake in resisting pollution of our neighborhoods, chemical exposures at work, and the damaging heat driven by global warming, the working class also needs to act to ensure that displaced workers have income support, retraining and moving expenses, and to make sure that transition to “green” production isn’t used to pay people less or impose worse conditions

From Resistance to Liberation

This direct proletarian ecological interest is key because the working class has the potential power to change the mode of production — to build a different way of generating goods and services from human labor and nature. Given the way capitalism is inherently stuck in an ecologically destructive dynamic, powerful social forces are needed to be able to shift to a more ecologically friendly mode of production. The working class can be a potential social force with the power to do this for two reasons. First, because the working class is a large majority of the society. And, secondly, because of the position workers occupy in the system of production and distribution. By building organizations of resistance in the workplaces and building a movement from fighting boss power day to day, the working class can build its social power or leverage, to act as a force to bend management decisions in a direction favorable to what workers want. And in the process of doing this the workers can and do develop their capacity to fight and their aspirations for change.

This is where the syndicalist strategy comes into play. Through the development of a worker movement that is worker-controlled and developing class consciousness and aspirations for liberation from the capitalist regime, a path is opened up for a direct shift to a different mode of production which workers would be in a position to create “from below,” through their own organized movement.

The syndicalist vision of self-managed socialism provides a plausible basis for a solution for the environmental crisis because a federative, distributed form of democratic planning places power in local communities and workers in industries, and thus they have power to prevent ecologically destructive decisions. For syndicalists, socialism is about human liberation — and a central part is the liberation of the working class from subordination and exploitation in a regime where there are oppressor classes on top. Thus for syndicalism the transition to socialism means workers taking over and collectively managing all the industries — including the public services. This would enable workers to:

- Gain control over technological development,
- Re-organize jobs and education to eliminate the bureaucratic concentration of power in the hands of managers and high-end professionals, develop worker skills, and work to integrate decision-making and conceptualization with the doing of the physical work,
- Reduce the workweek and share work responsibilities among all who can work, and
- Create a new logic of development for technology that is friendly to workers and the environment.

Being “Realistic”

Some people will argue that this is not a “realistic” strategy for the global warming crisis because of the need to make major moves away from fossil fuel burning in the immediate future. The process of organizing and building a powerful grassroots labor movement is probably going to be quite protracted. Thus various “democratic socialists” will argue that it is more practical to seek reforms through the electoral systems.

But that strategy faces the notorious problem of the inherent tendency of political bureaucracies and politicians to seek accommodation to capitalist interests. Socialists who support the electoralist strategy will concede that they need the potential for mass scale struggle and disruption to push the political leaderships for reform policies such as the “Green New Deal” — pushing for rapid shift of electricity production and transport sectors away from reliance on the burning of fossil fuels. But the best way to build the capacity of the working class to engage in this level of social struggle and disruption is through the kind of grassroots movement building that green syndicalists advocate. So, in fact, our strategy is realistic after all.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Tom Wetzel
The Working Class Stake in the Fight Against Global Warming
22 August 2023

Retrieved on 10 March 2024 from eastbaysyndicalists.org.

theanarchistlibrary.org