

The Environmental Crisis

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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The world is facing a very serious environmental crisis. Key environmental problems include air pollution, the destruction of the ozone layer, vast quantities of toxic waste, massive levels of soil erosion, the possible exhaustion of key natural resources such as oil and coal, and the extinction of plants and animals on a scale not seen since the death of the dinosaurs 60 million years ago. We think that this crisis is likely to have catastrophic effects in the future. Even today, the negative effects of the crisis are evident in the form of growing deserts, increased rates of cancer, and the loss of plant species which could hold out cures for diseases such as AIDS etc.

What caused the crisis?

We disagree with those environmentalists who blame the crisis on modern machine production. Many dangerous, environmentally destructive technologies and substances (for example, coal power stations, non-degradable plastics which do not rot in the ground) can be replaced with safer and sustainable industrial technologies (for example, solar technology, starch-based plastics). We think that modern forms of production have many potential advantages over small-scale craft production. Such as greatly increasing the number of essential products like bricks produced, and freeing people from unpleasant toil. We also disagree with the argument that says that workers and peasants cause the crisis by consuming “too many” resources. Most goods consumed in the world are consumed by the middle class and ruling class.

Instead, the real blame for the environmental crisis must be laid at the door of capitalism and the State. These structures create massive levels of inequality which are responsible for much ecological devastation. How? The accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of the few is associated with excessive and unjustifiable high levels of consumption by the ruling elite. The poverty caused by the system also creates environmental problems. For example, by forcing the poor to cut down trees for firewood, exhaust the tiny bits of farm land that they own in a desperate attempt to provide food, pollute rivers because they lack proper plumbing facilities etc.

Capitalists also build many goods to break as soon as possible (forcing people to buy replacements), thus resulting in unnecessary waste. Many goods that are produced are deliberately destroyed in order to keep prices up, such as the 200 million tons of grain stockpiled world-wide in 1991. 3 million tons could have eliminated all famine in Africa that year. Capitalists have developed safe, alternative technologies, which can replace environmentally destructive processes and substances. But they do not want to install these new technologies, or even proper safety and monitoring equipment, because this costs money and cuts into profits. They prefer to leave ordinary people to suffer pollution. Capitalists also promote inefficient and resource-wasting products in place of those which are more suited to sustaining the environment. For example, they promote private car ownership (which consumes massive amounts of petrol per person), in place of public transport systems (which minimise fuel consumption).

The State defends and supports these practices. It does not want to impose strong environmental protection laws in case this hampers profit-making. In addition, the military activities of the State are a major cause of the environmental crisis. Massive amounts of resources are wasted on the building the repressive arm of the State: world-wide, about \$900 billion dollars is spent on the military every year. Weapons such as nuclear bombs have been developed which are capable of destroying all life on earth. Often, the knowledge acquired in making these weapons is applied

to industry, resulting in very dangerous technologies such as nuclear power (from research on nuclear bombs), and pesticides (from research on chemical weapons).

Working people, unions and the environment

We think that environmental issues are directly relevant to working class, poor and working peasant people. These oppressed classes are the main victims of the environmental crisis. It is the workers who have to work in the factories that spew out toxic waste, who have to spray the pesticides which poison the land and water. It is the communities of the poor which are built next to the polluting industrial areas. It is the working peasantry whose land is destroyed by soil erosion. The environment is not just the veld and the wild animals, it is also where people live and work. A safe environment is thus a basic need for the masses. Only the masses have a direct and immediate interest in fighting against the environmental crisis: the ruling class benefits directly from the capitalist and State system which caused the crisis, and is able to shield itself from many environmental hazards in its luxury suburbs and air-conditioned boardrooms.

We therefore think that the way the environmental crisis must be dealt with in a class-struggle manner. Clearly, capitalism and the State are by their very nature destructive of the environment, and are thus a potential threat to the very survival of life on Earth. It is only the working masses, who are the main victims of the crisis, and who are the only force capable of defeating the ruling class, which can halt the environmental crisis.

In fact, because most environmental damage takes place at the point of production (for example due to dangerous technologies, poor plant maintenance, hazardous operating procedures, and poor worker training), the powerful trade unions can play the key role in fighting for the environment in the here-and-now. We have already seen in this in South Africa where the Chemical Workers Industrial Union organised against the importation of toxic waste by Thor Chemicals. In the long-term, the trade unions can move beyond just defending the environment to saving it, by taking over the factories, farms and mines and introducing safe technologies.

A worker-peasant revolution will help the environment in several ways. It will remove capitalism and the State, the main cause of the problems. It will eliminate the wasteful and excessive consumption of the rich. It will redistribute the land and end poverty. It will restructure production in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Resist!

In the immediate term, the Workers Solidarity Federation argues for workers in polluting factories to enforce safety rules and monitor pollution. We support actions by workers and communities to reduce and stop pollution. Where factories cannot be made safe, they should be closed down, but their workers should get re-employed at the same pay and skill levels in the same area. The environmental question needs to be related to the issue of land redistribution by pointing to how the legacy of racist land allocation in South Africa has resulted in the ecological devastation of the homelands.

While we think that nature reserves should be retained, we recognise that such reserves were often set up under Apartheid at the cost of poor communities, resulting in much bitterness. Therefore we call for these communities to have some access to grazing, dry wood and other resources.

We think that local communities should receive a portion of the reserve's earnings. We call for the unionisation of workers at such facilities.

We oppose all testing of atomic, biological and chemical weapons in all circumstances and support direct action and union campaigns against these tests. We oppose the testing of medicines and other products on animals. These practices are unnecessarily cruel, and scientifically flawed as results obtained on one species (e.g. cats) are not applicable to other species (e.g. humans). It is the oppressed classes who suffer the effects of exposure to unsafe medicines.

We call for strike action against companies "strip mining" forests, in order to force them to reforest and manage extraction. This preserves both jobs and the environment. We call on unions to establish their own environmental monitoring systems, and to publicise and organise actions against companies that expose workers and the community at large to toxic substances, pollution etc. Within unions, we raise the issue of pressurising industry to use recycled products where necessary and to find alternatives for products or by-products that harm the environment. This should be backed by industrial action.

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