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International seminar on climate change

Climate change, energy revolution and social transformation

- IV Online magazine - 2008 - IV399 - April 2008 -

Publication date: Saturday 5 April 2008

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The seminar which was held in Amsterdam from 23-27 February, 2008 at the invitation of the International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) was extremely fruitful and stimulating.

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Entitled "Faced with climate change, energy revolution and social transformation", this initiative, unprecedented for the Fourth International, brought together in an open way activists who were experts and experts who were activists, some of whom were members of our political current, some who were not.

Among the experts, we should note in particular the interventions of Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, climatologist, Daniel Tanuro, agricultural engineer, Carine Barbier, energy economist, Michel Husson and Jean-Marie Harribey, economists, Phil Ward, chemist, the physicist Jean-Paul Deléage having sent his excuses. Altogether, more than 50 people attended the seminar, coming from Europe (Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Spain, France, Britain, Greece), Asia (Turkey), North America (Canada, the United States) and South America (Brazil). Many of them have been directly involved in building mobilizations and movements against the climate change.

The guiding lines of these exchanges were to examine the state of scientific knowledge on climate change, to analyze the neo-liberal responses that are proposed for it, and to define the broad outline of an alternative response to this challenge, both in programmatic terms and in terms of building a worldwide mobilization on climate change,. To do that, it was essential to reconsider in a detailed way the energy question in all its dimensions: the discussions thus dealt with the necessary energy transition, but also the Marxist theoretical corpus.

Invited as a resource person, the climatologist Jean-Pascal van Ypersele (Catholic University of Louvain) outlined, in the light of the most recent work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) the gravity of the diagnosis concerning the modification of the climate and its foreseeable consequences on the ecological, social, medical or alimentary levels, which is now the subject of a very broad consensus among the scientific community. He insisted in particular on the fact that the IPCC based its analyses on an exhaustive taking into account of the whole of the scientific literature: an approach which can lead us to underestimate somewhat the extent of the changes in progress, but which, at the same time, is the basis for the very strong credibility of its work.

In fact the consequences in terms of reduction of greenhouse gas emissions that flow from the objective of stabilization of the temperature recommended by the IPCC appear as a gigantic challenge. Many participants insisted on the solid basis of support that this work represent: an analysis and recommendations that are shared by the world scientific community, to take account of which really comes directly in conflict with the operation of the capitalist economy and with its technical foundations. Michel Husson examined from this point of view, in particular in the light of the theory of long waves, the possibility of the emergence of a green capitalism. He insisted on the daunting question of profitability with which a green capitalism that claimed to be more than simply a "green-painted" capitalism would be confronted.

Daniel Tanuro presented the various facets of the neo-liberal response to the climate crisis, detailing the limited and insufficient character of the objectives laid down at Kyoto and of the measures taken, but also the perverse effects of the mechanisms that were chosen. He insisted on the turn being taken on the level of the ruling classes: the recent conference in Bali in December 2007 showed that they are becoming conscious of the need to come up with a response to the developing crisis, which by no means signifies that this response will be effective on the ecological level or satisfactory from the point of view of the oppressed. Not only it is likely to be completely insufficient, but the

mechanisms that are favoured are likely to lead to a reinforcement of imperialist domination and the neo-liberal offensive.

In this framework, Jean-Marie Harribey presented a detailed criticism both of the markets in rights to pollute and of the ecotax, questioning the methods of use of commercial mechanisms within the framework of a dynamic of progressive social transformation. Phil Ward supplemented this criticism by taking apart the Malthusian response, which often accompanies the dominant discourses, but also certain ecologist discourses on "overpopulation". Several comrades underlined how much this type of answer was always accompanied by violent attacks against women's rights. Joao Alfredo, a Brazilian activist, furthermore presented the policy of fighting against climate change of the Lula government. He showed how much this policy leads to the multiplying of ecological damage, in particular by the frenzied development of biofuels, with the disastrous consequences which result from it for the poor and landless peasants.

Carine Barbier presented the main parameters from which the outlines of an energy transition can be thought about: starting from the present characteristics of the production and consumption of energy, she highlighted the need for any process of social transformation to be accompanied by an energy revolution. She insisted on the fact that the cardinal point of this transition was the drastic reduction in energy produced and consumed, which is compatible not only with the maintenance but even with an improvement of the standard of living of the world's populations. It is only in this perspective of economy of energy that the system can be based on renewable energies and free itself from both fossil fuels and nuclear energy. She explained in what way purely technical answers to the climate crisis constitute illusions and often dangers (capture and sequestration of carbon, recourse to hydrogen, etc...).

Daniel Tanuro insisted on the need to start from the concept of a capitalist energy system, outlining the main features of this system. In fact, any analysis of capitalism which disregards its energy base appears eminently insufficient, in particular when it is a question of facing a challenge such as that of climate change and of the answers we need to find to this challenge. Drawing out his analysis, he also argued for a revision of Marxism on the energy question. He stressed the absence of distinction in Marx's work between energy of flux and energy of stock, which prevented Marx from perceiving one of the key dimensions of a capitalism based on fossil energies and from giving full force to his concept of "rational regulation of the social metabolism", characteristic of the relations between humanity and nature. At several points the question of the possible impact on the crisis of capitalism of the rarefaction of oil resources was discussed, the majority of the speakers tending to relativise the question by stressing the importance of the coal resources that still exist.

Michael Löwy and Joel Kovel, two of the principal organizers of the recently set up international ecosocialist network, gave reports relating to the ecosocialist perspective, particularly in relation to the unfolding climate crisis. In a report entitled "Worst-case scenarios and ecosocialism", Löwy underlined to what extent the developments in the global ecological crisis reinforce the urgency of a change of society. The discussion covered in particular the conditions of using pessimistic forecasts in mobilization and in political discourse, certain comrades pointing particularly to the negative effects of the reflexes of fear that could be generated. The editor of the review *Capital, Nature, Socialism*, Joel Kovel, tried to outline a global vision of the ecosocialist perspective. The discussion dealt particularly with the theoretical relevance of the analysis of nature as a value, and the risks of such an approach.

Lastly, the seminar tackled from several angles the question of struggles and the building of the mobilization against climate change. Terisa Turner, professor at the University of Guelph and ecofeminist activist, analyzed in a detailed and enthralling way a series of mobilizations in the countries of both the South and the North concerning the appropriation or the use of oil resources, underlining the cardinal role played by women in these struggles, for example in Nigeria. Pierre Rousset reviewed the balance sheet of popular mobilizations in the face of natural disasters: he presented concrete examples of North-South internationalist solidarity, in particular following the Asian tsunami and the Kashmir earthquake. He stressed the importance of building concrete international solidarity when such events occur, solidarity which can only be based on popular movements with real roots on the ground. Manolo

Gari, collaborator of the Trade-Union Institute of Work, the Environment and Health (ISTAS) of the Workers' Commissions (in the Spanish State), developed for his part the need to develop trade-unionism as eco-trade-unionism. Arguing that it was important for the trade-union movement to take up the climate question and to place it at the heart of its orientation, he underlined the various facets of the question, in particular in the conflicts within enterprises, and also outlined what was at stake.

The involvement of the trade unions on these questions will be decisive in the face of the character and the effects of the capitalist responses. He particularly stressed the demand for a "just transition": it should not be the workers who pay for the upheavals that are necessary. Which means combining defence of employment and defence of the environment. Lastly, the comrades present explained the mobilizations in progress over the climate, which have taken on a mass dimension in several countries, in particular in Australia, Belgium, Spain and Britain. Alan Thornett gave a progress report on the state of the mobilization in Britain, where in particular a conference of 300 trade unionists took place in the same month of February.

Although we may find it regrettable that the discussion on the demands to be put forward in the framework of the battle against climate change was not developed more, or that not enough participants came from countries of the South, this seminar nonetheless constituted a remarkable success, something that was underlined by all the participants. Everyone wanted a new seminar to be held in two years' time, hoping that by then progress will have been made in the building of a mass mobilization on the climate question. Already, these four days of discussions have had a first concrete result, since the members of the Fourth International who were present, in a meeting that discussed the balance sheet of the seminar, worked out a draft resolution to be submitted to the leading bodies of the International, who subsequently adopted it.