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Climate change/16th World Congress

Mobilization for the climate and anti-capitalist strategy

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Three billion human beings lack the essentials of life. The satisfaction of their needs requires increased production of material goods. Therefore increased consumption of energy. Today, 80 per cent of this energy is of fossil origin, and consequently a source of greenhouse gases which are unbalancing the climatic system.

However, we can no longer permit ourselves to unbalance the climate. We are probably no longer very far from a “tipping point” beyond which phenomena which are uncontrollable and irreversible on a human timescale are likely to be set in motion, which could lead to a situation that humanity has never experienced and which the planet has not experienced for 65 million years: a world without ice. A world in which the sea level would rise by approximately 80 metres compared to its level today.

The total disappearance of ice is certainly not for tomorrow: the process could take up to a thousand years. But it could be set in motion in twenty, thirty or forty years and involve a rise in the sea level of several metres before the end of the century. To prevent this happening, it is necessary to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, therefore to completely do without fossil fuels within two or three generations.

Do without coal, oil, natural gas? It is possible: the technical potential of renewable energies is sufficient to take over. But in practice, in the very short period of time we dispose of, the energy transition is possible only if it goes hand in hand with an important reduction in energy consumption. A reduction so great that it cannot be only attained by an increase in energy efficiency: a reduction of material production and of transport of goods is necessary.

This is enough to understand and to make people understand that humanity is facing a gigantic challenge. A challenge of a completely new nature, which will dominate the twenty-first century. A challenge which contributes to determining the conditions of intervention of revolutionary Marxists and of the workers' movement in general.

Capitalism cannot rise to this double challenge. Neither on the social level, nor on the environmental level. More exactly: it cannot rise to it in a way that is acceptable for humanity (I will come back later on this). The reason for this incapacity is the same on the two levels: the purpose of capitalism is not the production of use values for the satisfaction of finite human needs, but the potentially infinite production of value by many and competing capitals, organised around rival states.

A capitalism without growth is a contradiction in terms, says Schumpeter. The relative dematerialization of production is certainly a reality, but it is more than compensated for by the increase in the mass of goods produced.

This accumulation dynamic constitutes the fundamental reason for which “green capitalism” is an illusion, in the same way as is “social capitalism”. There are green capitals, without any doubt, there are even more and more, and they generate considerable surplus value. But they do not replace dirty capitals: they are added to them, and the latter, because they dominate, determine the rhythms, the technological choices and the modalities of introduction of the former.

The recent past does not leave any doubt on this subject. Look at Barack Obama: at the time of the presidential campaign, he promised to make the polluters pay, in order to massively support green energies (150 billion dollars in 10 years) and to help the most underprivileged layers in society to handle the increase in the price of energy. This policy was supposed to create five million jobs. But along came the subprime crisis and of all these intentions, there remains nothing. In the USA as in the EU, the polluters will receive rights to pollute for nothing, sell them at a profit and pass on the price to the consumers.

Capitalist climate policy reinforces the capitalists who are destroying the climate. Thus we can see in action the power of the fossil energy lobbies and the sectors which are linked to them, such as cars, shipbuilding, aeronautics, petrochemicals and others. This confirms the Marxist analysis according to which monopolies have the power to slow down the equalization of rates of profit. In the case of fossil fuels, this power is all the stronger in that it is anchored in the ownership of deposits, mines etc, therefore in ground rent.

The result is laid out before our eyes: in all countries, climate plans do not represent even half of what would be necessary in terms of reduction of greenhouse gases emissions. Moreover, these plans are deepening social inequality and are accompanied by a headlong flight into dangerous technologies: nuclear energy, the massive production of biofuels and the capture and geological sequestration of CO₂ (supposed to make coal “clean”).

It is within this general framework that we have to look at the farce of Copenhagen: the ultra-mediatised conference supposed to lead to a new constraining and ambitious international treaty to take over from the Kyoto Protocol ended in a rout: without targets in hard figures, without deadlines, without even a reference year from which to measure reductions in emissions.

Moreover, Copenhagen could well mark a turn towards a policy even more dangerous than that of the Protocol. By the agreement they concluded, in fact, the 25 big polluting countries were largely freed from the scientific pressure of the IPCC and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. It was a horse-traders' agreement between imperialism and the new rising capitalist powers, who shared out the atmosphere on the backs of the peoples, the workers and the poor of the entire world.

It is very much to be feared that the Cancun Conference in December will confirm this turn. In that case, on the basis of current national climate plans, we can project a rise in the average surface temperature between 3.2 and 4.9°C in 2100 (compared to the eighteenth century).

We should be wary of falling into a catastrophism with eschatological undertones. Some apocalyptic discourses, indeed, only invoke urgency in order to argue for sacrifices and to conjure away the responsibility of capitalism. But there is no doubt that a rise in temperature of 4°C would lead to real social and ecological catastrophes.

It is a question here of taking the exact measure of the threat. It is not the future of the planet which is at stake, nor life on Earth, nor even the survival of mankind. Apart from an asteroid dropping on us, a large-scale nuclear accident is probably the only thing that can threaten the survival of our species. Climate change, in any case, does not threaten it. But it threatens to seriously worsen the conditions of existence of the 3 billion men and women who already lack the essentials of life. And it threatens the physical survival of a few hundred millions of them, those who are the least responsible for global warming.

Mike Davis, in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, described in detail the horrible famines which caused tens of millions of victims at the end of the nineteenth century. These famines were the combined result of an exceptional sequence of El Nino and of the formation of the world market in agricultural produce. It is the repetition of such tragedies that we must expect. With the difference that this time the drama will be due entirely to the thirst for profit of big capital, in particular of the monopolistic sectors based on fossil fuels.

This enables us to define precisely the reasons for the inability of capitalism to meet the challenge. “There is no situation without a way out for capitalism”, said Lenin. Indeed. But this time the way out is likely to be particularly barbarous.

The ecological crisis and the social crisis are one and the same

It is obvious that the ecological crisis and the social crisis are one and the same crisis: the crisis of the capitalist system. The expression “ecological crisis” is misleading: it is not nature which is in crisis, but the relationship between society and nature. It is not the climate which is in crisis, and its disturbance is not due to “human activity” in general: it is due to a certain type of this activity, historically determined, based on fossil fuels. The ecological crisis, in other words, is nothing but a manifestation of the deep systemic crisis of capitalism.

It is absolutely obvious that satisfying the right to development and to social needs in general at the same time as carrying out the gigantic reductions in emissions which are necessary in the coming forty years is possible only if you adopt a radical anti-capitalist perspective. Esther Vivas will come back to our political tasks in the second part of this report. I will confine myself here to listing the principal measures which are necessary: to remove useless or harmful production; to plan the transition towards another energy system; to establish renewable sources and to develop energy efficiency, independently of the costs (according to thermodynamic rationality, not profit); to transfer, massively and free of charge, clean technologies to the peoples of the South, via the public sectors of the countries concerned; to set up a world fund for adaptation to the effects of global warming in poor countries; to support peasant agriculture against agribusiness; to relocate a substantial part of production, in particular agricultural production; to redistribute wealth by making inroads into the revenues of capital; to radically reduce working time and work rhythms, without loss of wages, with hiring of extra workers; to expropriate the credit and energy sectors....

People say: “it is easier said than done”. No doubt, but the first thing to do... is to say it. And that is what we must do initially, as an International: say it. That will not isolate us, on the contrary. The fight against climate change gives really considerable credibility to the anti-capitalist alternative. The very scale of the problem, its global character, its urgency, the monstrous injustice of the foreseeable consequences: all that makes it possible to introduce directly and in very simple terms the need for a radical rupture with the generalized production of commodities.

Considering the enormity of what is at stake, it is much more than a policy option that is posed: it is a choice of civilization. Through the climatic danger, capitalism makes it possible for us to rehabilitate communism for what it really is: a project of civilization worthy of the name. The project of a human community self-managing common natural resources in a rational and careful way, in order to allow everyone to live well. Faced with vaguely anti-liberal projects, the fight against climate change reinforces our choice of a clearly anti-capitalist line, as it does our refusal of any participation in governments which manage capitalism.

Strategically, the fight for the climate is not distinguished for us from the general struggle of the exploited and oppressed. It can only be carried out effectively by them: the working class, young people, women, the poor, small farmers, indigenous people. The working class has to play an important role there, because only it can provide the foundations of another mode of production in which it will decide what is produced, how, why, for whom and in what quantity.

At the same time, it is an understatement to say that the environmental question in general, and the fight for the climate in particular, is difficult to introduce into the workers' movement. This difficulty results from the situation of the workers as the most exploited class, divorced from its means of production, divorced in particular from nature as a means of production, and which sees these means of production appropriated by capital confronting it as hostile forces.

The conclusion which results from this is that the possibility of integrating ecology into the class struggle depends on the class struggle itself. The more the workers are beaten, atomized, demoralized, the more they will see the defence of the climate as a threat, and the more the capitalist class will be able to really use the protection of the climate as a pretext to attack them even more. In such a context, ecological consciousness can progress only in the alienated form of an inner conflict between the consumer convinced of the necessity to behave in a sober and responsible fashion and the producer preoccupied by the loss of his employment.

On the other hand, the more the workers are successful in their struggles, the more they will gain confidence in their own strength, the more they will be able to deal with the ecological question by bringing to it collectively, as producers and as consumers of their own production, the anti-capitalist solutions that are essential.

A better relationship of forces between in favour of the exploited and oppressed is the necessary prerequisite for an anti-capitalist solution to the climatic crisis, in other words of any acceptable solution. But this prerequisite is by no means sufficient, and does not allow us to put off until later the fight for the environment. Indeed, in addition to its urgency, the ecological question has a certain number of specific characteristics such that the formation of an anti-capitalist class consciousness comes up against even greater obstacles here than in other fields.

Three conclusions flow from this:

- Firstly, the importance of building a political instrument, an anti-capitalist political party capable of presenting analyses of the double crisis, social and ecological. Seldom has the need for a revolutionary party and a revolutionary International, acting as a collective intellectual, been so obvious;
- Secondly, the importance of a programme of demands making it possible to link concretely the social and ecological dimensions of the capitalist crisis. The key point here is that the climatic crisis, by giving a new topicality to the idea of a completely different kind of society, rehabilitates at the same time the concept of the transitional programme, capable of establishing a bridge between the current situation and this global alternative;
- Thirdly, the importance of social dialectics to help the working-class vanguard to play its role. It is no accident that peasants, indigenous peoples and youth are on the front lines in the social mobilization for the climate. Young people are fighting for their future, against a monstrous society in which those in authority know what is happening, but let it happen. As for the peasants and indigenous peoples, unlike the workers, they are not divorced from their means of production, in particular the land. Faced with a capitalist system which has condemned them to death, they have understood that the fight for the climate is part and parcel of their overall struggle and confers upon it a formidable additional dimension of legitimacy. “The peasants can cool down the planet that agribusiness is heating up” said an official statement of Via Campesina a little before Copenhagen. The workers can also cool down the planet. By producing for needs, not for profit, by radically reducing working time, etc. The convergence of the social movements can help them to become aware of the enormous force that they represent. There lies in particular the importance of the Cochabamba conference convened by Evo Morales.

The Fourth International will call itself ecosocialist

By adopting this Draft Resolution, the Fourth International will call itself ecosocialist. Some people refuse this label, saying: “what use is it, socialism is enough”. Among the adversaries of ecosocialism, there are those for whom nothing has changed, who refuse that the pure schema of the October Revolution should be polluted by the ecological question. They are not, as far as I know, present in our ranks. Moreover, there are comrades who, while accepting the radical innovation of the combined social and ecological crisis, regard ecosocialism as an unnecessary concession to political ecology. That is not what it is about.

We can discuss at length whether or not there was such a thing as an ecology of Marx. Personally, I believe Marx was much more of an ecologist than we have said he was. But that is not what is really important.

What is really important is that all the Marxist currents missed the ecological question, that some of them continue to miss it and that all of them still have difficulty in responding to it in a convincing way.

Calling ourselves ecosocialists is first of all a way of saying “we have understood” or, at the very least, “we know that we must understand something which we did not understand”. It is a new label on the bottle, a little bit like the new shirt that Lenin said had to be put on. A new label can be useful.

But ecosocialism is much more than a label. Though the concept is still work in progress, we can indicate a series of points on which it is substantially different from socialism as generations of militants conceived of it, and as our own current conceived of it.

The starting point is that to stabilize the climate implies a different energy system. Not only other technologies to produce electrical power, heat or movement, but also a different kind of agriculture, a different rationality and a different organization of space. The building of this new system will inevitably be a long-term task, requiring the destruction of the capitalist productive apparatus. The taking of political power is only the starting point of this upheaval.

The new energy system that must be built implies necessarily the decentralization of the production of electric power – which is in particular a prerequisite for the rational use of heat - and the relocation of a part of its production. Decentralization and relocation are perfectly compatible with the project of world socialism, and essential to its democratic self-management. However, it cannot really be disputed that these two concerns do not emerge spontaneously from our programmatic tradition, which rather puts the accent on world planning of production and exchanges.

Another new set of problems relates to the importance of living labour. Our programme allocates a major role to the need to invest living labour in services such as personal care, teaching, health, etc. So these problems are not foreign to us. But, for all the other sectors, we rely on the idea that machines and robots will make it possible to free, to the maximum degree, producers from the burden of physical work. This idea must be called into question, because taking care of the ecosystems requires an intelligence and a sensitivity which can be only be brought by human labour. This is particularly obvious in the case of agriculture: in order to “cool the Earth”, as Via Campesina says, it is necessary to replace agribusiness by peasant or co-operative organic agriculture. That inevitably implies greater investment in human labour (which means neither the return to primitive agriculture nor the end of progress, but another form of progress).

Lastly, the very conception of nature needs to be re-examined. In the context of the capitalist ecological crisis Marxism can really no longer be satisfied with looking at nature solely from the point of view of production, i.e. as a stock of resources, a platform for work and a dumping ground for waste. We must also learn how to look at nature from the point of view of nature itself, from the point of view of large-scale exchanges of matter and of the operating conditions of the ecosystems, which in the final instance determine the living conditions of humanity. There are invaluable indications on this subject in Marx, we have to take hold of them and develop them.

On all these points, the resolution only opens up a process of ongoing theoretical work to which the International will have to come back. But it is important as of now to send out a signal, to show we are moving. In Copenhagen, in December, a breach opened. For the first time, a mass mobilization on global environmental issues took on the character of a social struggle against the system in place: “Change the system, not the climate”, “Planet not profit”. This internationalist movement will develop. It offers us considerable potentialities. An anti-capitalist tendency did not wait for us to develop. We must reinforce it.