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Ecosocialism:

A Reflection on US Ecosocialist Conference by an Organizer

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV460 - May 2013 -

Publication date: Saturday 4 May 2013

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On Saturday, April 20, at Barnard College in New York City, a coalition of Ecosocialists hosted a conference whose purpose was to call together [groups and individuals fighting ecological destruction from an anti-capitalist perspective]. The coalition evolved from a group of organizations originally calling itself the Ecosocialist Contingent, who held a public forum and rallied against the Keystone Pipeline in Washington on February 17.

This struggle and our collaborative process around ongoing specific fights, brought together 240 participants for a discussion endorsed by 29 different organizations, exceeding all expectations. Participants were pouring through registration well through the opening plenary. A majority of folks were New York residents though we had some attendees from Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and even our Canadian neighbors in Toronto. While students were a significant portion of the audience, the conference attracted numerous ecosocialist writers and organizers. In addition to the plenaries, I made time to take a look at the workshops and snap some pictures. Each one had roughly 50-75 people in attendance with consistently lively discussions after the main speakers.

Between sessions, discussions continued around the literature tables of participating organizations. In fact, the organizers had some trouble pulling folks back into the main room for plenaries. The high activity level of participants from different areas suggests that Ecosocialism not only has a theoretical place, but that its activists are eager to branch out and network as part of a larger coordinated struggle. One of the illuminating aspects of the conference was how many activists are knee deep in local ecological work as opposed to parties just interested in these talks.

These folks are working diligently in campaigns that have been betrayed by the Democratic party and straight up attacked by the GOP. Not surprisingly, the conversation about political action was concentrated on street organizing and involvement with third parties. One can easily imagine that there are many more ready for an amplified Ecosocialist voice in the environmental justice movement. If we can gather 240 organizers and activists for a conference which was organized in six weeks, what can we do in six months? A year? How can this collaborative outlook spread to other forms of struggle? Can it be useful for the anti-capitalist movement in general?

Reflections on Our Collaborative Work

Informally, one of the conference's student organizers made a critical comment that a majority of our presenters were from older generations. This was mostly true with some exceptions, notably the Divestment Campaign and Occupy Sandy workshops. Youth are very much entrenched in ecological work, consistently in the forefront of actions and national campaigns against mountaintop removal and the Keystone pipeline. These are people who are courageously radical and secure enough in their own political beliefs to risk their livelihoods. Arguably the limited amount of time, resources, and collaborative experience showed when it came to integrating youthful and veteran organizers for discussions of the future. How do we do a better collective job of bringing younger activists to the national table? The Ecosocialist Coalition made some progress in recognizing and dealing with this question, but we will have to work on making remedies more deliberate and efficient.

The Occupy Sandy workshop.

Another criticism of the conference was that the presenters were majority white and male. None of the presenters spoke from a queer perspective or integrated LGBTQ issues into their talks. Organizers made open and honest attempts to balance these issues. Rather than a problem specific to this conference, segregation and over-representation of older white men is an issue that pervades much of the radical Left. A systemic look reveals that the problem is not that women or people of color are not involved in ecology work. Quite the contrary, several conference participants spoke anecdotally that their experience in local work has been the opposite. The question is how can we organize deep and meaningful collaboration between the section of the movement represented at the conference and the environmental justice movement? If we merely cite the dilemma without taking self-conscious steps to fix it, our shortcomings will persist. An established national coalition, pooling its resources, could ensure access to a much more inclusive group of activists resulting in a more informed analysis and enhanced potential for effective organizing in the future.

On the other hand, I would like to take a moment to thank our seasoned activists and organizers for their experience and insight. Up and coming organizers are inheriting a rich history of ecological work based on Earth Day in 1970 and since. The lessons of this work will help to synthesize an Ecosocialist strategy. For example, Howie Hawkins, a founding member of the Green Party and ongoing Green activist and organizer, spoke during one of the workshops of re-raising the 1970s demand for socializing the energy sector. It is necessary to understand that this solution cannot simply be a nationalizing of industries, but requires democratic control. Without collective control by the people, a state-owned industry would only centralize Capital's vice grip on resources. This is the type of lesson that experienced organizers can and should be citing in our current effort to bring Ecosocialism to the ecological movement.

Conclusions

The conference, itself, was not perfect or without its logistical and planning hiccups. I do not advise organizing workshops only six weeks in advance if it can be avoided. And I am not suggesting that our coordinating structure is a model. The organizers did what they felt was best based on what was available. But now is the time to productively critique the process - to sum up our strengths and our weaknesses - so that the process can continue to function as a unity project, bringing together activists based on our common work, and one which I hope can be looked at as a significant step in the right direction.

There is plenty of work to be done. For one, the Northeast does not represent the entire country. The West Coast has its own fair share of ecology work, as well as the Mid-West, Southwest, and Southern regions. In the big picture, organizing this conference, as difficult as it was, will be one of the easier steps. It will take a lot of labor and time to grow Ecosocialism in other places until we can ultimately connect as a national effort. It would appear the time is ripe now that the Obama Administration has shown its true intentions on environmental policy. As the corporate profits continue to rise, multitudes of ordinary people continue to suffer from an ongoing streak of super storms and other violent changes in climate, and a non-stop assault of pollution. Ecosocialists here and abroad insist that there's no stopping us no