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Ecosocialism

Ecosocialists debate James Hansen's climate change exit strategy

- Debate - Ecology -

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Should ecosocialists reject a program that includes carbon pricing? Ian Angus and John Bellamy Foster reply to Daniel Tanuro's criticism of their approach "[The right's green awakening](#)".

Five years ago, in "James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy," John Bellamy Foster argued that proposals advanced by the noted climate scientist represented a "crucial first step," in the fight to stop climate change, but that they were insufficient and "not by any means the last step." [1]

Foster's article was the subject of several discussions in *Climate & Capitalism*, with some writers arguing that we should give more support to the "fee and dividend" part of Hansen's program, and others absolutely rejecting it.

In March of this year [2017], the Swiss socialist journal *A l'encontre La Brèche* published a two-part article by our good friend and C&C contributor Daniel Tanuro, titled "La taxe-dividende sur le CO2: menaces sur la droite, piège pour la gauche" (Tax-dividend on CO2: a threat from the right, a trap for the left), which strongly criticizes Foster and me for supporting Hansen's approach. [2]

Although I disagreed with his arguments, I felt that his article was as an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of ecosocialist strategy, so I offered to publish a translation in *Climate & Capitalism*, but arrangements had already been made to publish it on the socialist website *Jacobin*. It was posted there under the title "The Right's Green Awakening." [3]

The editors of *Jacobin* graciously agreed to publish a reply by Foster and me. It is reposted below.

The steps to ecosocialism

Any ecosocialist movement must have a strategy for organizing in the here and now.

We were pleased to learn that Daniel Tanuro was writing an article on carbon pricing schemes. His book *Green Capitalism: Why it Can't Work* makes important contributions to ecosocialist thought, and he has an impressive record of personal involvement in many radical environmental campaigns in Europe. We looked forward to the clear explanation and strong critique of market-based approaches to climate change that we know he could write.

Unfortunately, "The Right's Green Awakening" does not live up to the generally high standard set by his book. Instead of addressing the carbon-pricing plans that have surfaced in capitalist politics, Tanuro focuses his critique on proposals developed by leading climate scientist James Hansen and on the critical support that we gave his proposal in *Monthly Review* and *Climate & Capitalism*. [4]

Tanuro equates our position "and Hansen's rather different one" with a proposal advanced by some right-wing American politicians, arguing that we support "a populist variant . . . [of] neoliberal doctrine." Naturally, we disagree.

We are not saying that our views are above criticism. Open debate is an essential part of building a global

ecosocialist movement, and we welcome thoughtful responses to anything we have written. However, since Tanuro's article seriously misrepresents both Hansen's plan and our approach to it, we need to correct his misunderstandings before a proper discussion can begin.

Hansen's Proposals

What we have called James Hansen's "Climate Change Exit Strategy" includes a fee-and-dividend plan, under which fossil-fuel companies would pay a periodically increasing carbon fee at the well head, mine shaft, or point of entry. All the revenue from these payments would be distributed as dividends to the population on a per capita basis.

Unlike carbon trading plans and taxes on consumer purchases, Hansen's proposed fee would be simple to collect and hard to evade. Hansen estimates that 60 percent of American citizens would receive more in dividends than they would have to pay in price increases.

Unlike mainstream economists who promise magical results from carbon pricing alone, Hansen realizes that "by itself, a carbon fee cannot solve the energy problem and allow rapid coal phase-out," so his program goes further than that. [\[5\]](#)

He includes an outright ban on tar sands oil, shale oil and gas, and methane hydrates as well as the closure of all coal-fired plants that cannot capture their CO₂ emissions "which amounts to every one in operation today.

Hansen also calls for the elimination of all subsidies to fossil-fuel companies, for a global transition to sustainable farming and forestry practices, for rapid reduction of methane, ozone, and black carbon emissions, for substantial aid to developing countries for clean energy development and implementation, and for investment in what he hopes will be safe, fourth-generation nuclear technologies.

These measures, taken together, represent a comprehensive climate-change exit strategy.

A Conservative Trojan Horse

The newly formed Climate Leadership Council (CLC) published "[The Conservative Case for Climate Dividends" in February 2017. [\[6\]](#) Six former Republican party leaders and the former chairman of Walmart all signed it, fearing that crude anti-environmental policies will hurt the Republicans at the polls, leading "younger voters[,] who hold the key to the future political fortune of either party," to support advocates of "growth-inhibiting command-and-control regulations."

To avoid that, they propose a plan "that showcases the full power of enduring conservative convictions." Their main proposal "a gradually increasing tax on carbon dioxide emissions distributed to all American citizens" does resemble Hansen's fee-and-dividend plan, but, in sharp contrast to his approach, they insist that it be tied to a "significant regulatory rollback." No ban on unconventional fuels, no shut down of coal-fired plants, and no investment in conservation or clean energy. "Much of the EPA's regulatory authority over carbon dioxide emissions would be phased out, including an outright repeal of the Clean Power Plan," they write, and citizens would not be allowed to sue emitters for damages.

What's more, fee increases will automatically end after five years unless a "Blue Ribbon Panel" decides otherwise. They don't specify the panel's composition, but we won't be surprised when fossil fuel interests play a big role.

In short, the CLC's caricature of a fee-and-dividend plan doesn't aim to prevent climate change. It is a Trojan horse for trashing every practical measure that might contribute to that goal.

In practice, of course, actual Republican leaders have decided to abolish regulatory protections without bothering to set a carbon price or to promise voters a dividend, so Tanuro's concern that the CLC plan "could shape public consensus in a real way" seems misplaced.

Ecosocialists and Hansen's Program

This conservative scam is not the same as Hansen's plan, and it bears no resemblance to the revolutionary ecosocialist program that we have defended for years.

Nevertheless, Tanuro tendentiously links Hansen's views to the conservatives — describing the CLC plan as "an idea first proposed by prominent climatologist James Hansen" and asserting that "Hansen originally formulated the plan." He refers to "Hansen's and the CLC's proposals" as if they were identical. Then, much to our surprise, he claims that John Bellamy Foster "strongly supported the dividend tax," as do "his followers, who include Ian Angus." He devotes the second half of his article to criticizing us for that.

Tanuro may not have intended to identify our views with those of the reactionary CLC, but that's certainly the impression his article creates.

Although both of us have written multiple articles about Hansen's approach to climate change, Tanuro's criticism is based on only one example, Foster's "James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy," published five years ago. [7] That article, the first in any socialist publication to discuss the nature and significance of Hansen's proposals, has two major sections: "Hansen's Exit Strategy," an objective account of the program, and "Capitalism's Ecological Footprint: Beyond Hansen's Exit Strategy," an ecosocialist critique that argues for "a much larger social transformation" than what Hansen imagines. (We think the criticisms of Hansen that Foster makes in this second section are actually much sharper and more complete than Tanuro's.)

In a shorter concluding section, Foster argues that Hansen's approach, despite its limitations, represents an important step forward for the movement to stop capitalist ecocide.

Throughout the article, Foster uses the term "exit strategy" to refer to Hansen's entire program, including his focus on shutting down pipelines, coal-fired plants, and unconventional fuel operations. Fee-and-dividend makes up only one part of the program, and, as Foster states clearly, it cannot stand alone: "all exclusively market-based strategies tend to backfire, since they rely principally on economic incentives." Hansen's fee-and-dividend plan, Foster writes, "is only a single wedge in what must be a much more comprehensive climate-change exit strategy."

Despite this, Tanuro repeatedly treats Foster's positive comments about the entire strategy as enthusiasm for the fee-and-dividend component. He says, for example, that we "argue that the dividend tax is the only feasible approach in the current context." In context, Foster's words clearly say that is Hansen's view, not ours: "This has led him to promote fee and dividend as the only feasible approach for getting carbon emissions down rapidly" (emphasis added).

Indeed, Tanuro repeatedly confuses Foster's presentation of Hansen's views with Foster's own opinion of those views. For example, Foster praises Hansen, who is not a socialist, for making a "calculated attempt to push through the maximum plan that the regime of capital could conceivably accept." That comment clearly refers to Hansen's intentions with the entire exit strategy, but in Tanuro's hands, it becomes, "They argue that the dividend tax is . . . 'the maximum that the capital regime could reasonably accept,' as Foster puts it."

Similarly, Tanuro objects to Foster's description of Hansen's program as a "first step," because "the solution can only come . . . from the convergence of the concrete struggles of the exploited and the oppressed," implying that Foster ignores such struggles. He fails to note that immediately after mentioning this first step, Foster cautions:

A real solution demands a radical alteration in social priorities "the kind of revolutionary transformation that could occur at unimagined speed if the population were once to reach its own social-environmental tipping point.

Too often, Tanuro takes Foster's words out of context, changing their meaning. He writes: "Foster argues that Hansen's [fee and dividend] proposal is 'objectively revolutionary.'" Here is Foster's entire sentence:

What is objectively revolutionary in Hansen's proposal is its root in a shared sense of emergency and crisis that can be readily communicated at the center of the system in the monopoly-finance capital economies themselves.

Neither of us has ever suggested that a stand-alone fee-and-dividend plan is revolutionary. As Angus has written:

[F]ee and dividend can be part of a radical action program against climate change, but isn't sufficient by itself, and isn't suitable for building the mass movements that socialists know are needed.

Correcting all of the misquotes and misrepresentations in this article would take much more time and space, but we think the point has been made. Daniel Tanuro is criticizing us "and Hansen " for views we do not hold.

The Exit Strategy's Importance

Stripped to essentials, Tanuro's article makes two important points. First, "[t]he market can't be the solution . . . We have to confront the dynamics of accumulation, which the fee-and-dividend simply cannot do." And, second, we need "a social strategy that allies with the exploited and the oppressed to develop an ecosocialist alternative."

We agree entirely. That's exactly what Foster argues in the very article Tanuro criticizes.

The Hansen exit strategy for all of its strengths is itself insufficient. Its weakness is that it does not go far enough in addressing the social-systemic contradictions generated by the power structure of today's monopoly-finance capital. What is needed under present circumstances is an acceleration of history involving a reconstitution of society. The kinds of changes to be considered in the context of a planetary emergency cannot be confined within the narrow channels that the ruling class and its political power elite will accept. Rather, an effective climate-change exit strategy must rely on the much larger social transformation that can only be unleashed by means of mass-democratic mobilization.

Ecosocialists need not debate if market solutions can do the job (they can't) or if we need to build a mass movement that can stop capitalist ecocide (of course we do). The real issue is: how do we get from here to there? How can

ecosocialists, a relatively small political current, contribute to building the broad and united movement we agree is needed?

Tanuro's article doesn't address the *practical context* within which Hansen's climate change exit strategy developed. Conservative and liberal organizations that work closely with fossil fuel companies have long dominated the American green movement. As Naomi Klein shows in *This Changes Everything*, the largest green groups have "entangled their fates with the corporations at the heart of the climate crisis . . . [A]lmost no one's hands are clean." We can make little progress against climate change as long as such forces have organizational and political control.

That's why ecosocialists should support groups and campaigns like 350.org, Idle No More, and NoDAPL. While few of these "new climate warriors," as Klein calls them, are explicitly anticapitalist, they nevertheless put their bodies on the line to stop capital's most destructive projects. [8]

James Hansen played a critical role in motivating and building the new radical climate movement. He isn't just any climate scientist or just any activist. Since he first testified before a congressional committee in 1979, he has been recognized as the world's leading climatologist and a central actor in the new climate movement.

He has been arrested in an attempt to block coal-fired plants and in a protest over the Keystone XL pipeline designed to bring Alberta tar sands oil to the Gulf of Mexico. His activism, and willingness to be arrested in relation to these issues, shows what he considers to be essential.

A climate change exit strategy initiated by ecosocialists would undoubtedly have been stronger and more radical than Hansen's, but it would not have had the same significance or scientific credibility. When a figure of his prominence draws radical conclusions from the failure of governments and corporations to act, the Left needs to pay attention.

Foster wrote his 2013 article for exactly that reason: to alert ecosocialists and others on the left to an important shift in green politics, a sea change that offers new possibilities for united action against capitalist ecocide. We write such articles because we agree with Marx: "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs."

We disagree with aspects of Hansen's program. We're uneasy about his support for nuclear energy, and we think he overemphasizes the fee-and-dividend part of his program. But we can never build a broad movement if we insist on unanimity. Unless you believe that putting a price on carbon must be absolutely opposed on principle — and that's not Tanuro's view, since he favors a tax on aircraft fuel — there is no reason to reject Hansen's exit strategy out of hand.

We aren't debating whether fee-and-dividend offers a complete solution, but whether a program that includes it, along with campaigns to shut down coal plants, fracking, and tar sands mining, can contribute to a mass climate change movement.

As we build that movement, we will find ourselves working alongside people who think that "putting a price on carbon" represents the best solution. (If we don't find ourselves working with them, we haven't reached out far enough!) Should ecosocialists simply push them away? Or should we push them left, arguing, "If such a program is introduced, it must directly target fossil fuel corporations, while protecting the living standards of working people and the poor," as Hansen's proposal aims to do?

We need a program for action against climate change that can win support from a broad range of current and potential activists. Hansen's program may not be perfect, but we do not know of a better one proposed by an

environmentalist with his influence.

The fee-and-dividend plan doesn't conflict with building a mass movement, unless we present it as the sole solution. As part of a broad exit strategy along the lines Hansen proposes, it offers a principled basis for developing a broad anti-climate change movement and advances a systemic challenge to capitalism.

We agree with Daniel Tanuro that the market is not the answer: *ecosocialism is the answer*. Despite any disagreements we may have, we look forward to working with him on that vitally important project.

28 April 2017

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[1] *Monthly Review* 1 February 2013 "[James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy](#)".

[2] *A l'encontre La Brèche*, 14 March 2017 "[La taxe-dividende sur le CO2: menaces sur la droite, piège pour la gauche \(I\)](#)".

[3] *Jacobin* 24 April 2017 "[The Right's Green Awakening](#)".

[4] *Monthly Review* 1 February 2013 "[James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy](#)" and *Climate and Capitalism* 5 October 2014 "[Hansen's 'fee and dividend' plan: An exchange](#)".

[5] Open Source Systems, Science, Solutions (OSS) "[Fee & 100% Dividend](#)".

[6] See "[The Conservative Case for Carbon Dividends](#)".

[7] *Monthly Review* 1 February 2013 "[James Hansen and the Climate-Change Exit Strategy](#)".

[8] See "[We are standing up to the fossil fuel industry to stop all new coal, oil and gas projects and build clean energy for all.](#)", *Idle No More* "[Join in a Peaceful Revolution](#)" and [No to the Dakota Pipeline Archive](#).