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Ecology

Ecology debate opened

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At its November 2000 meeting the International Executive Committee (IEC) of the Fourth International (the world-wide organisation of revolutionary socialists) discussed a draft resolution on "Socialism and ecology" which will be debated at the 15th World Congress of the Fourth International. This draft was prepared by a commission set up following the IEC meeting of February 2000.

The IEC decided that this debate should take place publicly in the press of the International, and that all those who wish to participate should write contributions which we would also hope to publish. The publication in IV of this document in its current provisional form, like the account below of the oral debate at the IEC, is intended to promote this broad and open debate.

As the resolution's reporter explained, the draft has a programmatic significance: it is intended to contribute to the renewal, in an essential aspect, of the revolutionary Marxist programme. It seeks to make up for the considerable delay that our movement has suffered from in its theorising on the question of ecology. The draft was drawn up on the basis of a document which had been prepared in 1990 and published in the journal "Quatrieme Internationale" [\[1\]](#) - but which, because of insufficient time for discussion, was not approved at the 13th Congress of the International. In the opinion of the reporter, this text was an excellent starting point, but it was necessary to update it, render it more readable and, in particular, transcend a certain Euro-centrism, by stressing the increasingly significant role of the socio-ecological movements of the Third World (the expressions Third World or South, used in the draft to refer to the countries of dependent or peripheral capitalism, have no scientific value and are used only for convenience). The 1990 document also suffered from a certain workerism and it was necessary to correct this through reference to the significant participation of peasant and indigenous movements in the struggle to defend the environment.

In the view of the reporter, the draft is an attempt at a Marxist analysis of the ecological crisis, which puts at its centre the link between the latter and the productivist/destructive logic of the capitalist system. It also differs from the usual ecological texts by a radical proposition for the solution of this crisis which threatens the future of humanity: against the commodification of the world, for an economy based on other criteria than those of exchange value and the law of profit - social needs and the preservation of the environment. This implies a change in social relations and socialist/democratic planning. The text seeks also to promote convergence between the social movements and the ecological movement around demands of common interest.

The reporter admitted that the draft could be improved and contains weaknesses, repetitions and omissions, and he invited IEC members to contribute, through discussion, to its improvement.

Many comrades from various countries - Luxembourg, Quebec, Holland, Germany, the Spanish state, Ecuador, Britain, the Philippines, Italy, France, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Portugal - participated in a frank and amicable oral debate in the plenary session. Most recognised the urgency for the International of grasping this problematic, and the programmatic implications of the debate opened. They also praised the work of the commission and recognised the importance of the draft proposed, which they compared to other programmatic documents approved in the past, like those on women's liberation or socialist democracy. Nonetheless, there were quite a few criticisms and proposed corrections put forward.

Many of these were recognised as legitimate by the reporter, who expressed the desire to integrate at least some of them in the revised version of the document, to the extent that this was possible - that is, within the current word limit of the text (necessary to allow its translation).

Here, grouped by themes, are some of these remarks:

Capitalism and the environment

– It is not enough to talk about capitalism; it is also necessary to talk about the existing technique in our societies and of the productivist model in the relationship of society to nature. Moreover, it is not enough to speak of democratic planning: we must emphasise the preservation of the environment as one of the essential objectives of any planning.

– We should bring out more clearly the links between capitalist globalisation and the environment, the ecological damage resulting from structural adjustment and deregulation.

– There is no reference to the ecological damage caused by imperialist (or reactionary) wars, whether in Europe - NATO's bombing of Serbia - or the countries of the South (Philippines, East Timor and so on).

– We are against the capitalist mode of production, responsible for the destruction of the environment, but we are not advocates of zero production, particularly in the countries of the South, which need to develop their productivity to satisfy the elementary needs of their population.

– The critique of the cultural dimension of capitalist societies, as well as their way of life and consumption, needs to be developed. In particular, a greater place needs to be given to the critique of the car society (or the dictatorship of the car) and the analysis of the huge ecological problems brought about by the individual car system - promoted by the marketing of the car industry, bourgeois individualist ideology, as well as the urban structure of the big cities, which obliges workers to make long journeys.

The question must be posed of a complete reorganisation of the transport system - for example, trains rather than lorries, collective transport rather than cars - and a new urban planning. The role of the road lobby and the oil multinationals must be addressed. Oil, source of so much pollution and slicks will in any case run out in the coming decades: hence the urgency of the search for new renewable sources.

– To strengthen the alliance between the workers' movement and the ecological movements, the questions which link the two must be stressed: health at work, new sources of employment created by renewable energies, and so on. It is also necessary to set as an objective an ecologisation of the workers' movement and the Fourth International itself.

At the same time, let us be clear: we do not defend all currently existing jobs, for example in the nuclear industry or cars. A fight is needed to guarantee a job and an income for all, but not necessarily in one's current post.

– Our self-criticism, as Marxists, on the ecological question, should be accompanied by a critique of the ecological NGOs, which are often apolitical and / or hostile to Marxism. In the resolution's analysis of the currents of the ecologist movement there is a lack of reference to the so-called direct action current, of libertarian inspiration, composed of very combative youth, which has played a significant role in the anti-neoliberal mobilizations.

– The ecological struggle often has links with the struggles of national minorities (for example, African-Americans in the USA) or indigenous communities, which are victims of particularly brutal forms of pollution and destruction of the environment.

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– Whatever one's opinion on the future of nuclear energy, technical solutions are needed to the problems of nuclear waste which have already accumulated to a formidable degree and which must be neutralized.

– The 1990 document contained a list of ecological demands supported by our movement: abolition of nuclear energy and so on. This has vanished in the new version, and this is regrettable, inasmuch as these demands are consensual within the International.

On other questions, however, the reporter remained sceptical, or doubtful, either through disagreement or because these questions needed further debate in the movement or were not indispensable to the document:

– The document is over critical of Marx and Engels. Recent Marxist works show that there is a strong ecological dimension in their writings.

– A more critical attitude is needed towards the Green parties, which are no longer radical in any way. Their evolution is towards increasingly rightist and moderate positions. They are institutionalised and embourgeoisified, as shown by their position on NATO's war against ex-Yugoslavia.

– The demographic question, which is a key given (albeit a complex and difficult one) of the ecological debate, must be taken up.

– We need to polemicise against the conservative "small is beautiful" ideology, fairly influential in the ecological movement.

– A position needs to be taken on the eco-taxes debate (to support them in certain cases, argued some comrades, while others maintained they should be rejected).

– A fundamentalist position on genetically modified organisms should not be adopted. They can be useful from the point of view of the production of food or fighting disease. What we should criticise is the private appropriation by the capitalists of genetic discoveries.

Finally, some criticism or proposals were not accepted by the reporter:

– Some sections of the document should be dropped, for example the chapter on the Fourth International and ecology.

– The document is too marked by anti-technical and anti-scientific prejudices of romantic inspiration.

– It would be better to abandon the concept of productivism, which might lead to our being confused with the partisans of zero production.

– We should fight for an ecological dual power, which gives workers in the places they work or live the right of veto on installations, which present a danger to their health.

[1] See Quatrieme Internationale n° 39, decembre 1990-janvier 1991, pp. 89 to 116