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South Africa: Looking back at the Rio Summit farce

Lucien van der Walt

1992

A discussion of the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, which proved an absolute failure in terms of attempts to halt environmental destruction. I wrote this for a short-lived anarchist paper called Revolt, published in Johannesburg in 1992 (it appeared in issue #2; there wasn't, in fact, an issue #1!). There is other material from that issue of Revolt here. It was one of the first I ever published (I was just getting into activism) and, if its imperfect (which it is), it still has some good points.

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As far as the Greens go, 1992 is being heralded as a turning point. The Rio Earth Summit managed to assemble the leaders of over 100 countries at a single place at a single time, to discuss the doomsday cause that the planet is on... but is it all a farce?

For a start, the individuals that sat around the table to discuss environmental degradation are the very same individuals who have caused the problem (ie. the state leaders backed, no doubt, by campaign contributing multinational bosses) . How can the cause of a problem dish out a solution? The only logical solution is the elimination of the cause.

To understand why we are in the situation where the environment is being threatened at allfronts, one needs to investigate and address the issue of the global economy, since environmental degradation is in most, if not all, ways related to the capitalist production and consumption of material goods.

Economically linked multinational enterprises, transnationals (TNC's) control 70% of world trade, 50% of foreign investment and 30% of global gross domestic product. As they control the markets of almost all industries (from the petrochemical, to pharmaceutical to food) they control the pollution, and associated environmental damage.

20 of the largest pesticide makers control 94% of the world's agrochemical sales, a majority of which is sold to debt-ridden third world countries who have no choice but to purchase due to the mechanisation policies of the West. In some cases, banned substances like the dreaded DDT are still being used in third world countries. It comes as no surprise since the third world is seen as dumping ground for dangerous products, like drugs, that the West has banned.

TNC's are responsible for 50% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions in the 6 biggest industrial sectors that together account for more than 80% of the problem. It is clear why, even after the dangers of CFC's have been shown, TNC's are proposing a gradual phase out programme instead of an immediate and total ban.

TNCs are heavily involved in the destruction of tropical forest in Africa, SE Asia and Latin America. The Rio Farce saw the North dictating to third world nations to cease activities that have detrimental effects on the environment while the third world is in a Catch 22 situation. It sees the exploitation of natural resources as one of the ways in which it can rid itself of the tightening debt noose that the World Bank and IMF has fixed on it.

The link between the TNCs, commodity prices and the environment is also clear. When export commodities, prices drop (rice, coffee, cocoa, sugar and cotton prices are 20% lower in 1989 than 1980) poor countries earn less revenue, which means more poverty, less development, and increased destruction of the environment. In the meantime suit-and-tie jobs in Wall Street, Diagonal Street, etc. play juggler with commodity prices to ensure maximum profit margins ... at any cost.

Of course it is in TNC's interest to avoid fundamental changes. Last year, Germany's powerful chemical industry saw to it that the State failed to adopt environmental standards; in April Dutch industrialists threatened to locate out of Holland if the government effected its proposed carbon law; the Californian based furniture industry took its highly pollutive factories straight across the border to Mexico where it continued exploiting the environment and at the same time got a double benefit by having cheap Mexican labour at its disposal ... thereby exploiting people as well.

[US President] Bush refused to agree to any environmental constraints at the Rio Farce that would [have] adversely affected US TNC's.

TNC's and their governments at Rio undermined any measures limiting their pollution and timber activities and last year the UN Commission on TNC's was axed largely due to TNC pressure.

Clearly a solution to environmental problems cannot and will not be handed over on a silver platter by governments or [their] TNC allies (and vice versa) since too many vested interests are involved. Once again grass roots action from below seems to be

the only way to slow down and hopefully halt the rape of Mother Earth.

To conclude: The destruction of the planet cannot be stopped by barricading ourselves against the advancing bulldozers ... we need to be in the driving seats of these machines and our destinations should be the multi-story, multi-million dollar offices of TNC's and the Capitol Hills and Union Buildings of the world.