

The Environment

A Workers Solidarity Movement Position Paper

Workers Solidarity Movement

November 2007

Contents

Perspectives	3
1. Crisis	3
2. False Solutions	3
3. Solutions	4
4. The WSM and the environmental movement	4
Current Issues	5
5. Climate Change	5
6. Peak Oil	6
7. Food Production	6
8. Population	7
9. Nuclear Power	7
10. Biotechnology/GMOs	7
Tactics	8

“The environmental crisis we are living through, encompassing unpredictable climate change, resource depletion, pollution and species extinction has primarily been caused by industrial capitalism. The origin of this crisis, and the ways in which the effects have been managed point to a real lack of democracy in society. False solutions to this crisis dominate debate. These include market-based cure-alls, “green” party electoralism, “power of one” style individual action and state regulation and taxation.” WSM position paper on the Environment as introduced at November 2007 conference (this paper replaced our old “Environment and Animal Rights” Position Paper, last amended at the May 2010 conference.

Perspectives

The environmental crisis we are living through, encompassing unpredictable climate change, resource depletion, pollution and species extinction has primarily been caused by industrial capitalism. The origin of this crisis, and the ways in which the effects have been managed point to a real lack of democracy in society. False solutions to this crisis dominate debate. These include market-based cure-alls, “green” party electoralism, “power of one” style individual action and state regulation and taxation. While capitalism may very well survive this crisis and learn to manage its effects, this will undoubtedly be at the expense of the vast majority of people who do not possess such means. To avoid this, and to guarantee genuine long-term sustainability, requires fighting for revolutionary change. In the WSM, we seek to involve ourselves in environmental struggles in order to spread our ideas and tactics and thus to help bring about such change.

1. Crisis

We live at a time when the environmental conditions and resources that humanity relies upon are being depleted and adversely disturbed. Climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction impact on the lives of countless people worldwide. This crisis is not inevitable, it has been caused by the particular nature of production within capitalism. The profit motive forces companies to keep their costs to a minimum. This leads to production practices that are directly harmful to both workers and the natural world, which in turn effects working class people locally and elsewhere. The need for capitalism to expand has resulted in much unnecessary and socially useless production as well as goods being produced with built-in obsolescence.

Global shipping, carrying 90% of goods, accounts for 5% of carbon emissions per year. In some cases local production may result in higher emissions even when the entire transport chain is taken into account. Capitalism actively suppresses environmentally friendly practices and technology, working against efficient public transport for example.

2. False Solutions

As described, the crisis is caused by the nature of production within capitalism. At present, debate and proposed solutions to this crisis do not recognise this fact, instead looking to the market, the

state and the individual to provide solutions. The market cannot solve environmental problems. Trading pollution quotas and other such practices do nothing to tackle the fundamental reasons for the crisis. The state, with or without the presence of Green Party members in government, may attempt to legislate and tax to ensure environmentally responsible behaviour. This likewise ignores the causes, merely tinkering at the edges of the problem. 40 years of such lobbying for state regulation has done nothing to prevent the current situation. "Green" consumerism and lifestyle changes merely creates further markets for capitalism. It blatantly ignores that it is the capitalist system of production and not individual actions that has caused the environmental crisis.

3. Solutions

- a. Humans are part of the natural world. During our development we have both deliberately and accidentally altered that world. So have other species. The environment is a dynamic system created and recreated by the organic and inorganic processes that act on it. With the industrial revolution that transformation escalated as capitalism expanded without regard for the negative impacts of industrialisation on the environment, an impact that on a local basis has already produced zones no longer capable of sustaining humans at the densities that was once possible. We can never escape the environment entirely and therefore it is in our interests to ensure that the environment remains capable of sustaining human life at least at the levels it currently can.
- b. Human needs in relation to the environment cannot be reduced to the need for food and raw materials even if these are essential to life. It is also a need for leisure space and recreation. Beyond that in order to preserve the complexity and diversity of remaining ecosystems, the consequences of the destruction of which cannot be fully understood, we need to preserve significant areas of 'wilderness' where human impact is minimal and carefully managed. Achieving this requires creating a system of democratic control over human activity both at the level of bio-regions and the planet as a whole. Capitalism cannot deliver this situation. An anarchist revolution, creating a free and democratically organised society can do so.
- c. An anarchist revolution will not only eliminate the principle cause of environmental degradation but will allow the effects of environmental damage to be managed rationally. Producing according to human need rather than for the sake of profit will eliminate overproduction and will stop or seriously limit harmful production processes. Rational organisation of society will stop much of the inefficient and wasteful use of resources that is endemic to this society. Democratic control of society will mean that the effects of environmental harm are managed in the best interests of all humanity rather than affecting most those without the money or power to deal with them.

4. The WSM and the environmental movement

- a. Our role as anarchists is to spread anti-capitalist ideas and strategies within the environmental movement and bring an environmental perspective into the struggles and mass organisations we are involved in. We need to combat those who argue for compromise

with the capitalist class and the state or those who argue that the interests of individual groups of workers can be held above the need of the global working class for an environment that can sustain human life.

- b. That sections of the environmental movement that sees a solution through capitalism and the state must be marginalised as the rest of the movement adopts an anarchist analysis, organisation and strategy. Tendencies that seek to make workers, particularly in the global south, carry the cost of cost of the environmental crisis must likewise be marginalised. Our general approach is that where industrial or agricultural practises are critically damaging ecosystems the fighting for the end of such practises must include fighting for compensation for the workers, including those who work the land, who depend on them for their livelihood.
- c. We want an environmental movement that is genuinely progressive, that is organised on directly democratic lines, that acknowledges the root causes of the crisis, and that uses direct action as a strategy.

Current Issues

5. Climate Change

- a. We note that the overwhelmingly consensus among climate scientists is that the release of massive quantities of CO₂ once locked away in a variety of fossil fuels is causing significant changes in climate through increasing the quantity of the sun's energy retained by the earth.
- b. We note that this has become a major issue of concern for the capitalist class as reflected in the COP process but that the configuration of actually existing capitalism is making it impossible for our rulers to collectively agree never mind impose the implementation of a set of planet wide rules that can limit future emissions to a level that does not threaten drastic consequences to the peoples of the world.
- c. We note that much of the damage to date has been done by a small minority of the powerful imperialist states and that any solution needs to address this historic legacy. Within these state the decision not to control carbon emissions as the danger became apparent was made by the capitalist class alone, workers are not permitted to decide how the industries they work in are run.
- d. We note that the known existing deposits of conventional fossil fuel are already greater than the quantity that can be used without the release of such quantities of CO₂ to cause disastrous climate change.
- e. We reject arguments that Climate Change can be addressed through market mechanism either at the global level through carbon trading or at the individual level through consumer choice.
- f. Therefore as short terms measures

- We oppose any future fossil fuel exploration that is not based on using less CO2 producing fuels (like gas or conventional oil) to take more producing ones (like coal or unconventional oil or peat) out of production as part of the process of shifting energy production to carbon neutral forms.
 - We oppose all extraction of unconventional oil and coal deposits and the closure of all power stations that make use of these deposits. We argue that any consumption taxes introduced to shift energy consumption patterns should be revenue neutral in relation to the working class and to the global south.
 - Public transportation, including long distance transportation, should be free of charge where based on low or 0 carbon release power sources. Workers in transportation should fight for such a transformation. Transportation, including long distance transportation, should not be the preserve of the wealthy alone.
- g. We struggle to build a movement based on achieving climate justice on a global level, a movement that by necessity must transform economic and political relations on the planet. That is a movement for a classless society based on direct democracy and production according to need.

6. Peak Oil

- a. Fossil fuels, especially oil and gas, are finite. However, the vast quantities that remain in the ground are more than sufficient to result in runaway climate change if they are extracted.
- b. We reject the scaremongering of groups who predict an immediate collapse in society or a chaotic transition to a post oil society. We also disagree with the idea that imposed measures to manage increasing energy costs will be necessary or desirable, we oppose authoritarianism in every circumstance.
- c. Instead we argue for class-based participatory decision-making. The destruction of the state system and the ending of capitalist control over production will liberate resources that can be redirected to their communities of origin to meet the many challenges of energy transition.

7. Food Production

- a. Food production and processing remains one of Ireland's biggest industries. It is controlled by and concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, focusing on competition and short-term profitability rather than society's needs and long-term sustainability.
- b. This occurs within a framework of the global neo-liberal agenda that promotes an agricultural model based on monocultures and shipping food over huge distances, thus using vast quantities of oil, gas and water. It threatens not only our health but also our soil, air, water, woodlands and natural habitats.
- c. Instead of this, we seek a coordinated system for food production and land management in Ireland. Decisions should not be made on the basis of accumulating capital but of producing healthy food while maintaining soil fertility, natural habitats and biodiversity.

8. Population

- a. Increases in the earth's population require greater effort to produce the food and raw materials needed to ensure a happy life for that population. With any given technology resources are finite and even though technological innovation often results in expanding available resources we cannot assume this process will go on for ever. Under capitalism, where profit is the only consideration, new technologies very often result in environmental degradation. Further expansion of the earth's population makes the task of ensuring a happy life for all with an environment that remains capable of supporting humans increasing complex and difficult.
- b. However population growth does not have a linear relationship with the level of impact on the environment. Under capitalism there are huge differences in resource use between ordinary people who live in different parts of the planet due both to relative poverty denying access to goods and services to many and to the implementation of different solutions to fill basic needs. The problem is not simply the level of population nor people's right to access goods and services but the way these needs are sold by a system that rates profit and expansion above everything else. We argue against those who would simplify this reality to focus on population growth or consumption alone
- c. The world's resources, properly employed, can sustain the world's population and potentially even more. A more equal society with greater personal freedom would doubtless result in a levelling off of population figures. Such a society could provide a comfortable life as well as a sustainable ecological footprint.

9. Nuclear Power

- a. Currently, nuclear power is demonstrably unsafe. Profits and the needs of the arms industry are placed before safety and the risks are far too great to justify its use.
- b. Power production through renewable resources such as wind, wave and solar energy are far more desirable. Increased provision of energy efficient housing and energy saving initiatives could substantially reduce the growing demand for power.

10. Biotechnology/GMOs

- a. There has been a rapid development of genetic engineering and biotechnology. Biotechnology like any other technology holds out the promise of an improved standard of living but also of potential dangers.
- b. For example advances in fertility treatment maybe of tremendous advantage to childless couples. Genetic screening can give advance warning of diseases like cancer.
- c. We do not know if genetically engineered food and medicines pose an inherent threat because there is no independent, publicly answerable research into these issues.
- d. The fundamental issue is not technology but who controls it. That does not mean we uniformly embrace all technology. In general we favour environmentally friendly technology, for example, wind and solar energy as opposed to nuclear power.

- e. Under capitalism we oppose the introduction of GM crops, which cross-pollinate with the natural plant. Their introduction in an anarchist society would depend on conclusive research and a democratic debate about the necessity or value of such crops.

Tactics

- a. While there are many environmental issues which are of serious concern, we do not believe that we can or should concentrate equally on all of these. Many environmental issues can only be resolved through drastic social change and so people feel unable to change them and are not encouraged to act. We want to be involved in struggles that encourage people to become active because we want to develop a working class that is confident, combative and capable of organising society for itself. Working fruitlessly on issues that we cannot hope to change within the current situation will not bring us any closer to this. We need to identify those struggles which are capable of developing into mass movements and argue within these for anarchist ideas and tactics.
- b. In Ireland (as in many countries) the state and bosses have openly welcomed corporate investment at a high cost to the local environment. "Jobs or the environment" has been the stark choice forced on many communities and it is one that we reject out of hand.
- c. However, in so doing, we recognise that the strategy of pitting job prospects against environment well-being is a valuable tool in the state/ bosses' hands, allowing them to weaken and, in some cases, split the environmental opposition. The problem for us is compounded by the reality that the environmental movement itself is nearly always a cross-class alliance with workers' interests the last and, sometimes, the least to be considered. Sections of the environmental opposition are openly disinterested in the economic realities that many of us have to face, while others are uncomfortable about how to tackle it.
- d. As class struggle anarchists we have an important role to play here. Our analysis sees the vital link between building an effective environmental opposition movement and fighting capitalism, particularly in the workplace. In particular, areas where there is a direct overlap should be important to us. When there are struggles in the 'environmental risk' sector – chemicals, pharmaceuticals and mining/ refining – we should seek to highlight these. It is important that among environmental activists we break down the idea that workers in these industries are 'in with the bosses' – they are not.
- e. Class analysis should be kept central to our interventions and propaganda. It is important that we face the argument of 'jobs versus the environment' and be at the forefront in the movement arguing for ways to address the issue from a tactical and practical point of view – i.e. what sort of jobs do we want and at what cost etc? Within the broader movement we should be clear about the all-class nature of environmental struggles. We should be tactical in our approach – working within them with our eyes open and only for as long as they advance the struggle.
- f. This implies a focus on community and workplace campaigns on environmental issues. Examples of these are the Shell to Sea campaign in Mayo and the anti-incinerator campaign

in Cork. Within such campaigns we argue consistently for direct action as a tactic although we do not rule out other forms of campaigning. We encourage education about related environmental and class issues and the building of links between campaigns.

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Retrieved on 15th October 2021 from www.wsm.ie
Introduced at November 2007 Conference. Amended May 2010

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