

“Ecosocialism” Against Marxism

John Bellamy Foster & Co.

Part One

The United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a new comprehensive review of climate-related scientific research on September 27. The authoritative report finds that recent warming of the planet is, in its words, “unequivocal” and that human activity is “extremely likely” to be the primary cause. As the world continues to heat up, sea-level rise and the loss of Arctic sea ice are expected to be somewhat greater than was forecast in the IPCC’s previous report, issued in 2007, although extremes of weather will likely not be as bad as some headlines have suggested.

Predictably, the “climate skeptics” launched a fusillade of anti-scientific drivel in an attempt to discredit the report, whereas the full spectrum of environmentalists read it as sounding the alarm for immediate government action. Among the green missionaries is System Change Not Climate Change: The Ecosocialist Coalition (SCNCC). This lash-up was initiated by the reformists of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), along with the Solidarity group, in the name of “bringing together eco and socialism.” Other endorsers include the fake Trotskyists of Socialist Action, the left-wing intellectuals of *Monthly Review*, the spiritually minded *Ecosocialist Horizons* and chapters of the small-time capitalist Green Party.

For young radical activists, it might seem a natural to try to fuse eco-radicalism with socialism. But environmentalist ideology and socialism are entirely irreconcilable. All variants of environmentalism are an expression of bourgeois ideology, offering fixes predicated on class-divided society and the reinforcement of scarcity. Marxists fight for a society that will provide *more* for the toiling and impoverished masses and ultimately eliminate material scarcity altogether. To this end, it will take a series of workers revolutions across the globe to rip the mines, factories and other

means of production from the grip of their private owners, paving the way for an internationally planned, collectivized economy.

Until then, the profit-driven capitalist system—marked by the anarchy of production and the furious chase for markets, the division of the world into nation-states and the accompanying interimperialist rivalries—will remain a fundamental barrier to addressing the unintended human-derived contribution to climate change. Decaying modern capitalism also greatly exacerbates the potential toll of a warming world on mankind. The wretched conditions imposed by the imperialists on Third World countries make their populations especially vulnerable to climate change, not to mention disease, famine and other ever-present ravages. (These issues are taken up in depth in our two-part article “Capitalism and Global Warming,” *WV* Nos. 965 and 966, 24 September and 8 October 2010.)

In contrast to revolutionary Marxism, for the eco crowd the villain is growth, and their watchword is *less*. Proposals to limit consumption and cut back production dovetail with capitalist austerity measures. The main political organization of the environmentalists, the Green Party, is open about its defense of production for private profit, simply favoring small-scale enterprise. The 13th-richest person in the world, the union-hating Michael Bloomberg, is an outspoken environmentalist who, after Superstorm Sandy, proposed that New York City “lead the way” in battling climate change. Even if the city rulers take steps to protect Wall Street from storm surges like the one that accompanied Sandy, it will still be hell—and perhaps high water—for those in public housing. Then there are the many large corporations, such as DuPont, not about to be mistaken for a paragon of virtue, that have voluntarily adopted the emissions goals of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Most SCNCC supporters do not openly subscribe to the primitivism at the core of the environmentalist worldview, preferring to focus on dispensing policy advice to the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, the ISO and its SCNCC partners proceed from the false equation of capitalism with economic growth. The putative anti-capitalism of these and other eco-socialists is simply another means of arriving at the doorstep of an anti-growth agenda, providing a thin reddish veneer on retrograde green nostrums.

Take one of its foremost luminaries, *Monthly Review* editor John Bellamy Foster, who has written or coauthored several books published by Monthly Review Press. Foster’s seminal work, *Marx’s Ecology* (2000), paints Marxism as “deeply, and indeed systematically, ecological.” In a February 2010 interview, Foster opined: “We need a new economic structure focused on enough and not more. An overall reduction in economic scale on the world level, particularly in the rich countries, could be accompanied by progress in sustainable human development.”

Progress in human development, i.e., ending misery and want, will not result from curtailing production but from *raising* it to unparalleled heights. By lifting the dead hands of private profit and property rights, the proletarian seizure of power would give great impetus to economic growth. In this event, humanity also will be best equipped to consciously marshal its collective resources to meet both known and unforeseen challenges, including climate change.

Our vision of the socialist future accords with that expressed by the great Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky in an article titled “If America Should Go Communist,” which was published in the 23 March 1935 issue of *Liberty Magazine*. In describing the vistas that would be opened by a victorious socialist revolution in the world’s most advanced capitalist country, Trotsky wrote:

“Should America go Communist as a result of the difficulties and problems which your capitalist social order is unable to solve, it will discover that Communism, far from being an intolerable bureaucratic tyranny and individual regimentation, will be the means of greater individual liberty and shared abundance....

“National industry will be organized along the line of the conveyor belt in your modern continuous-production automotive factories. Scientific planning can be lifted out of the individual factory and applied to your entire economic system. The results will be stupendous.”

It should be noted that Trotsky was writing long before U.S. industry was hollowed out by its capitalist owners—a deterioration that itself points to the need for the working class to overthrow the capitalist order.

Intellectual Dishonesty and Opportunism

In 2002, Foster published *Ecology Against Capitalism*, a collection of essays written between 1993 and 2001. Leaning on sociologist Allan Schnaiberg, Foster described capitalism as “a treadmill of production” that consumes ever greater quantities of limited natural resources while disgoring their waste products into the environment:

“Clearly, this treadmill leads in a direction that is incompatible with the basic ecological cycles of the planet. A continuous 3 percent average annual rate of growth in industrial production, such as obtained from 1970 to 1990, would mean that world industry would double in size every twenty-five years.... It is unlikely therefore that the world could sustain many more doublings of industrial output under the present system without experiencing a complete ecological catastrophe. Indeed, we are already overshooting certain critical ecological thresholds.”

Ecology Against Capitalism in its own way mirrored bourgeois ideological triumphalism in the aftermath of the counterrevolutionary destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991-92. Communism was declared “dead” and capitalism was trumpeted as an ever-expanding global system. Government policies in the major capitalist countries, especially control of the money supply and interest rates, would supposedly henceforth ensure permanent and steady economic growth. Bourgeois economists coined the term the “Great Moderation” to describe conditions in North America and West Europe: low inflation and relatively shallow and short-lived economic downturns.

But then came the financial crisis of 2007-08, plunging the capitalist world into the deepest and most prolonged economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Great Moderation gave way to the Great Recession. Mass unemployment, savage cuts in wages and benefits and the slashing of government-provided social programs (fiscal austerity) became the order of the day.

Logically, Foster should have welcomed the current downturn since he identified the expansion of production with increasing environmental degradation. Fewer automobiles manufactured and on the road mean less atmospheric pollution. With less income, working-class families are forced to “conserve energy” by reducing their heating in the winter and air-

conditioning in the summer. However, Foster does not argue that the Great Recession has brought certain ecological benefits. To do so would provoke a hostile response from the young left-minded activists—e.g., those who identified with the Occupy movement—to whom he appeals.

So he sings a different tune about what’s wrong with capitalism. Last year, he came out with the book *The Endless Crisis: How Monopoly-Finance Capital Produces Stagnation and Upheaval from the U.S.A. to China*. It begins:

“The world economy as a whole is undergoing a period of slowdown. The growth rates for the United States, Europe, and Japan at the center of the system have been sliding for decades. In the first decade of this century these countries experienced the slowest growth rates since the 1930s; and the opening years of the second decade look no better. Stagnation is the word that economists use for this phenomenon.”

The “treadmill of production” has disappeared. Instead, we are told that the core countries of world capitalism have been mired in economic stagnation for decades and beset by perpetual crises. Foster continues: “In human terms it means declining real wages, massive unemployment, a public sector facing extreme budget crises, growing inequality and a general and sometimes sharp decline in the quality of life.” Notably absent from this list of ills is environmental degradation. In his speeches, Foster is known to describe capitalism both as a constant growth engine when addressing the “environmental crisis” and as a victim of stagnation when addressing the fiscal crisis, and never the twain shall meet.

From New Left Maoism to Green Radicalism

Foster’s views are conditioned by his longstanding association with *Monthly Review*. In the 1960s and early-mid ’70s, it was the main journal propagating Maoism (the Chinese variant of Stalinist ideology) in American left-wing intellectual/academic circles. Today a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon, Foster attended Evergreen State College in Washington State as an undergraduate in the early 1970s, when he first came under the influence of *Monthly Review* and its leading figures, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff.

The Maoist-Stalinist politics expounded by *Monthly Review* originated as the ideological expression of what Trotsky described as the bureaucratic

degeneration of the Soviet workers state in the mid 1920s-30s. Rejecting and fearing the fight for international proletarian revolution, which animated the Bolshevik Party that led the October Revolution of 1917, the ruling bureaucratic caste under J.V. Stalin put forward the doctrine of “building socialism in one country.” This dogma turned Marxism on its head. Socialism is a society of material abundance in which class distinctions are being finally overcome. Despite its possession of abundant natural resources, the USSR could not on its own surpass the material level of the advanced capitalist countries, which exerted economic and military pressures that eventually brought about the destruction of the Soviet workers state.

China experienced a profound social revolution in 1949 that overthrew capitalism and liberated the country from imperialist subjugation. The subsequent establishment of a planned, collectivized economy brought great social gains to workers, peasants and deeply oppressed women. However, the revolution, issuing out of a peasant-guerrilla war, was deformed from its inception under the rule of Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, a materially privileged, bureaucratic caste resting atop the workers state.

The Mao regime was modeled politically, economically and ideologically on Stalin’s Russia, although China in this period was far more backward than the Soviet Union. Mao’s version of “building socialism”—especially during the so-called “Cultural Revolution” that began in the mid 1960s—glorified the Spartan virtues of self-denial and self-sacrifice. While today’s CCP bureaucrats are not known for professing such nostrums—to say the least—they share Mao’s opposition to the Marxist program of world proletarian revolution. Challenges to the capitalist order would give impetus to the Chinese proletariat to sweep away the Stalinist caste that has politically suppressed it and appeased the imperialists.

To understand the appeal of Maoism as propagated by *Monthly Review* for critical-minded, young American intellectuals like Foster, it is necessary to consider the outlook and evolution of the self-described New Left. In the late 1950s-early ’60s, a generation of young liberal idealists, mainly college students, was propelled leftward by the mass black struggle against racist oppression domestically and the Cuban Revolution and escalating war in Vietnam internationally. Many of these radicals looked to

Mao’s CCP as an alternative to the stodgy conservatism of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy.

In this period, the large majority of the American working class, especially its predominant white component, supported U.S. militarism abroad in the name of combating world Communism. In their own way, New Left radicals accepted but then inverted official anti-Communist ideology. The political leaders and ideological spokesmen for U.S. imperialism claimed that capitalism was superior to Communism in Soviet Russia, not to speak of “Red China,” because it provided the American people, including industrial workers, with a much higher standard of living. New Left radicals agreed with the logic of this argument but reversed its conclusion. That working-class families could afford a late-model car, a washing machine and a TV set or two was viewed as the material basis for their support to U.S. imperialist predations in the Third World.

The *Monthly Review* circle sought to provide a “Marxist-Leninist” rationale for these prevalent New Left prejudices: disdain for the working class in the advanced capitalist countries combined with enthusing over “socialism” in the Third World. Sweezy argued that the working class as a whole in North America, West Europe and Japan constituted a labor aristocracy relative to the impoverished toilers of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In *Monthly Review* (December 1967), he wrote that Bolshevik leader V. I. Lenin “also argued that the capitalists of the imperialist countries could and do use part of their ‘booty’ to bribe and win over to their side an aristocracy of labor. As far as the logic of the argument is concerned, it could be extended to a majority or even all the workers in the industrialized countries.”

When describing the labor aristocracy, Lenin was explicit that he was not painting the entire working class in the imperialist centers with the same brush. Taking stock of England’s industrial monopoly and rich colonies in the mid 19th century, Lenin observed in “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism” (1916): “It was possible in those days to bribe and corrupt the working class of *one* country for decades. This is now improbable, if not impossible. But on the other hand, *every* imperialist ‘Great’ Power can and does bribe *smaller* strata (than in England in 1848-68) of the ‘labour aristocracy’” (emphasis in original). This well-paid layer

can occupy a privileged social position only in relation to the working masses of the society of which it is a part.

While disparaging the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, Sweezy glorified Mao’s China for supposedly building an egalitarian socialist society in one of the poorest countries in the world. Indeed, he considered China’s poverty a socialist virtue while crediting Mao with overcoming and eliminating what he contended were remnants of bourgeois ideology embedded in classical Marxist doctrine: “It was only in China, where of all countries in the world conditions were most favorable for revolution, that Marxism could finally be purged of its (essentially bourgeois) economistic taint” (*Monthly Review*, January 1975). By “economistic taint,” Sweezy meant the identification of socialism with qualitatively raising the material and cultural level of society.

At the time, we polemicized against those intellectuals like Sweezy and Charles Bettelheim who had revived the *anti*-Marxist doctrines of primitive egalitarianism and “socialist” asceticism:

“Far more so than Moscow-line Stalinism, therefore, Maoist ideology is a sustained attack on the fundamental Marxist premise that socialism requires material superabundance through a level of labor productivity far higher than that of the most advanced capitalism....

“Maoism’s primitivism and extreme voluntarism—particularly as presented during the ‘Cultural Revolution’ period—have had great appeal for petty-bourgeois radicals in the West. It was the promise of an end to alienated labor here and now, without the whole historical period needed to raise the technological and cultural level of mankind, that enabled many of the followers of [New Left theorist Herbert] Marcuse to transfer their loyalty to Maoist China in the late 1960’s.”

— “The Poverty of Maoist Economics,” *WV* No. 134, 19 November 1976

Maoism, however, lost its luster, particularly following the official rapprochement between the U.S. and China signaled by Richard Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972 as American bombs rained down on Indochina. By the late 1970s, it was no longer attractive to American student youth of leftist sympathies. So the *Monthly Review* circle latched on to the burgeoning green radical movement, which also came out of the New Left. Whence John Bellamy Foster, today the journal’s leading figure.

Bolivia and the Fraud of “Ecological Revolution”

Just as his mentors could posit the introduction of socialist relations in China through a “Cultural Revolution,” Foster does the same today in places supposedly in the throes of “ecological revolution.” In both cases, the professed values of the ruling regime are sufficient evidence of socialist achievement. This is despite the fact that whereas capitalism had been overturned in China with the 1949 Revolution, the countries that Foster hails today are unmistakably capitalist.

In the book *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (2011), Foster and his coauthors proclaim: “An ecological revolution, emanating first and foremost from the global South, is emerging in our age, providing new bases for hope.” In keeping with *Monthly Review* tradition, they reject the unique capacity of the working class in both the advanced countries and in the neocolonial world to overturn the capitalist order and collectivize the means of production—a potential based on the proletariat’s role in making the wheels of industry turn. Instead, Foster & Co. posit an “environmental proletariat” consisting of “the third world masses most directly in line to be hit first by the impending disasters,” especially sea-level rise, as “the main historic agent and initiator of a new epoch of ecological revolution.”

Ground Zero for this supposed revolution is Bolivia under Evo Morales, whom Foster hailed in a 2010 interview as “probably the strongest single voice for an ecological relation in the world today.” Environmentalists widely laud Morales for hosting the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in April 2010 as a counter-summit to official United Nations climate negotiations. Foster also finds evidence of his environmental proletariat in “the water, hydrocarbon, and coca wars” that “helped bring a socialist and indigenous-based political movement to power” in Bolivia.

Despite its name, the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS—Movement Toward Socialism) headed by Morales makes no bones about administering “Andean capitalism.” The social turmoil that Morales rode into office as the head of the bourgeois state involved a series of desperate struggles by Bolivia’s impoverished masses to resist imperialist exploitation. For example, the “water war” in 2000 consisted of large plebeian protests that broke out in Cochabamba after the Bechtel corporation took control of the city’s water system and jacked up rates by more than 200 percent.

In much of Latin America, popular revulsion at nakedly pro-imperialist “neoliberal” governments resulted in the election of a layer of bourgeois populists, including Morales and the late Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. This shift has nothing to do with socialism. Posing as defenders of the oppressed and exploited masses, Morales, Chávez et al. sought to co-opt and contain discontent within a capitalist framework, which necessarily means subordination to the world imperialist system. To smash the chains of imperialist oppression requires a proletarian revolution, led by a vanguard party, that shatters the bourgeois state. Such a revolution must have the perspective of spreading elsewhere in Latin America and, crucially, to the United States and other advanced capitalist countries.

The Morales regime showed its true colors this May when it unleashed violent repression against a nationwide strike called by the country’s largest union federation, far from the first time that it had suppressed workers and peasants struggles. The strike had galvanized tin miners, teachers and health care workers in the fight for better pensions. Police repeatedly attacked, gassed and beat striking workers, arresting hundreds. The guns have also been turned on the indigenous population. In September 2011, the government carried out a bloody crackdown on a protest against the building of a new highway through indigenous lands. The brutal assault by paramilitary police reportedly left a three-month-old baby dead.

The anti-proletarian essence of eco-socialism is captured in Foster’s salute to Morales and earlier to Chávez, which also shows how empty his “ecological revolution” is, even on its own terms. The economies of Bolivia and Venezuela are heavily dependent on natural gas and oil, respectively. Both regimes carried out partial nationalizations of their hydrocarbon industry. But it is not as if output has slowed. Indeed, in an attempt to double the production of natural gas by 2015, state-owned Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos is seeking both new foreign partners and new areas for exploration and production. The Bolivian government also plans to harness fossil fuel resources in national parks and protected natural areas.

Marxists defend such nationalizations as a means by which countries under imperialist domination can achieve a degree of economic independence. But these nationalizations do not herald a new socialist era. The hydrocarbon industries of Bolivia and Venezuela are part of national capitalist economies that are subordinate to the world market. In the end, nationalizing the hydrocarbon industry actually benefits the national bourgeoisies, not only at

an economic level but mainly at a political level, by tying the masses ideologically to their own exploiters.

Taking a Bite Out of Consumption

There is another important element of continuity between the version of Maoism espoused by *Monthly Review* in the 1960s-70s and its eco-radicalism of recent decades: the condemnation of American capitalism for creating a society of excessive consumption. For Sweezy/Magdoff, the wide range of goods available to most workers in the U.S. came at the price of the impoverishment of the peoples of the Third World. For Foster, the existing level of consumption of the American populace is destroying the ecological basis for the future survival of the human species and other higher forms of animal life.

The notion that a large part of the living standard of working people in the U.S. and other advanced capitalist countries consists of artificially created wants that serve corporate profit-making has been a recurring feature of left-liberal ideology since the late 1950s. It was explicated in *The Affluent Society* (1958) by John Kenneth Galbraith, at the time the best known and most widely read liberal economist in the U.S. (He subsequently became an adviser to the Democratic Kennedy/Johnson administration in the 1960s.) A few years later, the identification of American capitalism with consumerism was given a “Marxist” gloss in Sweezy and Paul Baran’s *Monopoly Capital* (1966), a book that strongly influenced Foster. In *Ecology Against Capitalism*, Foster declares that “wants are manufactured in a manner that creates an insatiable hunger for more.”

At the same time, Foster criticizes mainstream green intellectuals and activists who appeal to individuals to curtail their personal consumption, i.e., reduce their “carbon footprints.” As a polemical foil, he cites Alan Durning of Worldwatch Institute, who argues: “We consumers have an ethical obligation to curb our consumption, since it jeopardizes the chances for future generations. Unless we climb down the consumption ladder a few rungs, our grandchildren will inherit a planetary home impoverished by our affluence.” Foster responds:

“This may seem like simple common sense but it ignores the higher immorality of a society like the United States in which the dominant institutions treat the public as mere consumers to be targeted with all the techniques of modern marketing. The average adult in the United

States watches 21,000 television commercials a year, about 75 percent of which are paid for by the 100 largest corporations."

Both Durning and Foster accept that the consumption levels of most Americans should be curbed, differing only in the means of accomplishing this goal. Foster worries that appeals for sacrifice in the name of some ecological morality alone would fall on deaf ears. His answer is government action to reorganize the economy. Somebody, then, would have to make decisions regarding the genuine needs of working people as opposed to their supposedly unnecessary wants. This task undoubtedly is meant to fall to Foster and other like-minded guardians of green virtue.

This focus on opulent consumer faddism is above all a petty-bourgeois critique of capitalism. For children of suburbia who turn to individual lifestyle changes to find meaning, the problem might be having too much. But "doing more with less" is not an option for the vast bulk of the population struggling each month to pay the bills and make ends meet.

Rousseauian Moralism vs. Marxist Materialism

Denunciations of the culture of consumerism did not originate in the post-World War II United States. The underlying idea that the striving of most people for higher levels of consumption is driven by artificially created wants conditioned by a competitive society based on private property was expressed in the mid 18th century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The main intellectual influence in the European radical left before Karl Marx, Rousseau was the intellectual godfather of all later forms of leveling-down egalitarianism. Describing the world after the advent of private property, Rousseau wrote in *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755):

"Free and independent as men were before, they were now, in consequence of a multiplicity of new wants, brought into subjection, as it were, to all nature, and particularly to one another....

"Insatiable ambition, the thirst of raising their respective fortunes, not so much from real want as from the desire to surpass others, inspired all men with a vile propensity to injure one another.... In a word, there arose rivalry and competition on the one hand, and conflicting interests on the other, together with a secret desire on both of profiting at the expense of others. All these evils were the first effects of property, and the inseparable attendants of growing inequality."

Marx opposed the leveling-down egalitarianism prevalent among the socialist and communist currents in the early 19th century. The goal of communism is not to reduce people’s wants to some preconceived minimum. Rather, it is to realize and expand those wants. In a fully communist society, everyone will have access to the great variety of material and cultural wealth accumulated over the course of civilization. Consider what is required to do research in particle physics or to investigate the archaeological remains of ancient civilizations. We Marxists aspire to a future society in which all can pursue the creative scientific and cultural work hitherto restricted to a privileged few.

For Rousseau, the emergence of private property was the social equivalent of the Christian concept of original sin, the moment when all manner of evils entered into and disrupted mankind’s natural harmony:

“The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying ‘This is mine,’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not anyone have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: ‘Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.’”

—Ibid.

In opposition to Rousseau’s moralistic idealism, Marx applied a dialectical materialist understanding to the history of the human species. To reach a communist society, mankind must traverse a lengthy epoch of class-divided societies in which the majority is exploited and oppressed by a small minority of property owners:

“Although at first the development of the capacities of the *human* species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed.” [emphasis in original]

— *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Part II (Moscow, 1968)

In *Marx’s Ecology*, Foster makes a big deal about upholding dialectical materialism. However, his actual outlook is essentially Rousseauian, not Marxist. Thus, in his earlier *Ecology Against Capitalism*, he describes the

capitalist ruling elite as representing a “higher immorality” and condemns capitalism for bringing about the perversion of humanity and degradation of nature:

“By reducing the human relation to nature purely to possessive-individual terms, capitalism thus represents (in spite of all of its technological progress) not so much a fuller development of human needs and powers in relation to the powers of nature, as the alienation of nature from society in order to develop a one-sided, egoistic relation to the world.”

The left wing of the green milieu—neo-Rousseauian in its basic outlook—is especially incensed by the statement in Marx and Friedrich Engels’ 1848 *Communist Manifesto* recognizing the historically progressive character of capitalism compared to earlier modes of production: “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.” In *Marx’s Ecology*, Foster offers a halfhearted apology for this statement and then adds: “This leaves open the whole question of sustainability which they did not address in the panegyric to the bourgeoisie in the first part of the Manifesto.”

With the advent of industrial capitalism, there was for the first time a material basis for envisioning an end to scarcity and class divisions altogether. But the private ownership of the means of production increasingly acted as a brake on the further development of the productive forces. The emergence of modern imperialism at the end of the 19th century marked the onset of an epoch of global capitalist decay. The nation-state system, which had served as a crucible for the rise to power of a modern capitalist class, proved too confining to the pursuit of profit. The imperialist powers, having divided the world through bloody conquest, embarked on a series of wars for its redivision, seeking to expand their colonial holdings and spheres of influence at the expense of their rivals. The goal of proletarian revolution is to resolve the contradiction at the heart of capitalism by collectivizing the means of production, thereby making the bounty of society available to all and unleashing the productive forces.

Part Two

Part One of this article appeared in WV No. 1032 (18 October).

In *Marx's Ecology*, John Bellamy Foster contends that green ideologues mistakenly ascribe to Karl Marx positions he did not in fact hold, including that Marx “had an extremely optimistic, cornucopian view of the conditions that would exist in post-capitalist society due to the development of the forces of production under capitalism.” Foster goes on to state: “In this interpretation Marx relied so much on the assumption of abundance in his vision of a future society that ecological considerations such as the scarcity of natural resources and external limits to production have vanished.”

Focused as he is on transforming Marx into a proto-environmentalist, Foster completely misses the mark in assessing what these critics got wrong. Marx did maintain that a future communist society would be based on the elimination of economic scarcity. But he certainly did *not* think that the forces of production developed under capitalism were sufficient for this purpose. Quite the contrary!

The transition to communism requires a planned, socialized economy to facilitate the development and application of new technologies and thus raise the level of labor productivity *far above that inherited from capitalism*. It is simply outside Foster's framework that a future socialist society would utilize the most advanced technology in order to redress environmental degradation. But that's not all; he falsely attributes a similar pessimism to Marx, who, he writes, “demonstrates a deep concern for issues of ecological limits and sustainability.”

In polemical writing, what is omitted is often just as important as what is explicitly discussed, if not more so. By far the best-known exposition in Marx's writings of the transition from the overthrow of capitalism to a fully communist society is in the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Yet despite two passing references to this work in the 250-plus pages of *Marx's Ecology*, the relevant passages are not taken into consideration.

In the *Critique*, Marx explained that in the initial phase of a socialist society “bourgeois right” would still persist. In other words, the means of

consumption allocated to individuals would be proportional to the quantity and quality of their labor:

“The individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he gives to it.... He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such and such an amount of labour (after deducting his labour for the common funds), and with this certificate he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labour costs. The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another.”

Marx proceeds to describe the conditions enabling society to transcend the principle “to each according to his labor”:

“In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!”

In this work, Marx also indicates how the productivity of labor is to be increased during the transition period. He criticizes the Lassallean program, which holds that the entire social product will be available for the consumption of the direct producers. Instead, a portion of it must be deducted for other purposes, not least the “expansion of production,” that is, the construction and utilization of additional means of production embodying the most advanced (labor-saving) technology.

How can Foster reconcile the Marxist vision of a communist society, in which material resources are freely available to all, with his own contention that the *existing* level of production and consumption is rapidly destroying the environmental basis for human life? He can do so only by projecting an eco-socialist society in which “to each according to his needs” is *substantially less* than “to each according to his labor” in today’s advanced capitalist countries! This program was spelled out by Foster at a gathering of Occupy protesters in New York City in 2011. As reported

in *Monthly Review* online (MRZine.org, 29 October 2011), he implored his audience:

“Move away from a system directed at profits, production, and accumulation, i.e., economic growth, and toward a sustainable steady-state economy. This would mean reducing or eliminating unnecessary and wasteful consumption and reordering society—from commodity production and consumption as its primary goal, to sustainable human development. This could only occur in conjunction with a move towards substantive equality.”

What Foster is projecting is a reactionary utopia—the equality of poverty on a global scale. A “steady-state economy” would condemn the hundreds of millions of people in Third World countries to continued impoverishment. This vision of the future is like a right-wing caricature of communism—what used to be derided as “barracks socialism,” similar to the condition of uniform equality imposed on conscripts in an army.

Nonetheless, some left-wing activists may respond sympathetically to Foster’s argument that working people in the U.S. and other “rich” capitalist countries have to accept a lower standard of living to avert a supposedly looming ecological catastrophe. Yet they are virulently hostile to the right-wing ideologues of the Tea Party, who contend that the American people have to reduce their expenditure on consumption, especially in the case of social programs, to avert a supposedly looming fiscal catastrophe. That Foster denounces capitalism while the Tea Party types extol the “free market” system does not make his program less reactionary, only more seductive.

Capitalism Is *Not* a “Treadmill of Production”

The basic argument in Foster’s *Ecology Against Capitalism* can be stated briefly. Capitalists seek to maximize profits. They therefore produce more and more commodities that embody surplus value, which is extracted through the exploitation of labor. The expansion of production in turn causes the ever-worsening degradation of the environment. Foster writes:

“Capitalist economies are geared first and foremost to the growth of profits, and hence to economic growth at virtually any cost—including the exploitation and misery of the vast majority of the world’s population. This rush to grow generally means rapid absorption of energy and materials and the dumping of more and more

wastes into the environment—hence widening environmental degradation.”

Why is it, then, that throughout the history of capitalism there have been periods in which production and the employment of labor contract and consequently the volume of profits decreases? For example, between 2005 and 2009 the gross (before tax) profits of U.S. corporations declined by 10 percent, from \$1.610 to \$1.456 trillion. Profits in manufacturing fell especially steeply, from \$247 to \$125 billion.

The answer is that capitalists seek to maximize not the volume of profits but rather the rate of profit, or return on capital. Using Marxist terminology, this rate is the ratio of surplus value over the value of the means of production (plant and equipment) necessary to set labor into motion at the prevailing level of productivity. The rate of profit is the *main regulator* of capitalist production in both its expansion and contraction phases.

During a period of expansion, the rate of profit tends to fall. Increased demand for labor pushes up wage rates. The effects of increasing labor productivity through investment in new technologies gradually diminish. Increased investment drives up the market price of capital goods. Financial speculation further inflates the market value of capital, contributing to much faster increases in the price of corporate stocks compared to the earnings of the underlying firms.

At a certain point, capitalists therefore cut back on new investment. The overall economy then enters a period of contraction. As Marx explained in Volume III of *Capital*:

“Not too much wealth is produced. But at times too much wealth is produced in its capitalistic, self-contradictory forms.

“The limitations of the capitalist mode of production come to the surface:

“1) In that the development of the productive power of labour creates out of the falling rate of profit a law which at a certain point comes into antagonistic conflict with this development and must be overcome constantly through crises.

“2) In that the expansion or contraction of production are determined by...profit and the proportion of this profit to the employed capital, thus by a definite rate of profit, rather than by the relation of production to social requirements, i.e., to the requirements of socially developed human beings.”

Keynesian Economics in Pseudo-Marxist Garb

In *The Endless Crisis*, Foster purports to provide a Marxist analysis of the post-2008 global economic downturn and, more generally, the contradictions of present-day capitalism. While using some Marxist terminology, his analysis actually corresponds to the main current of liberal reformism in the U.S. associated with the doctrines and policies of the late British economist John Maynard Keynes. Foster maintains that the income of the lower classes is insufficient to purchase the output of goods under capitalism. He writes:

“The system is confronted with insufficient effective demand—with barriers to consumption leading eventually to barriers to investment. Growing excess capacity serves to shut off new capital formation, since corporations are not eager to invest in new plant and equipment when substantial portions of their existing capacity are idle.”

In the terminology of bourgeois economics, this view can be categorized as an “underconsumptionist” theory of cyclical downturns.

In outlining his argument, Foster makes no reference to the rate of profit. As we have seen, during a period of expansion this tends to fall. Therefore, capitalists can sell the increased volume of commodities only at a price reflecting a lower rate of profit. From the capitalists’ standpoint, this condition appears to be one of “over-production” or “over-capacity.” They cut back on new investment, plunging the economy into a period of contraction until a higher rate of profit is restored by factors prevailing during the downturn—wage rates tend to fall, likewise the market value of capital.

The theory that the basic cause of cyclical downturns is a dearth of consumer demand relative to productive capacity did not originate in the era of monopolistic capitalism. The crux of this theory can be traced back to certain leading exponents of classical British bourgeois economic doctrines in the early 19th century, notably Thomas Malthus. Anticipating

Foster by two centuries, Malthus argued: “No power of consumption on the part of the labouring classes can ever alone furnish an encouragement to the employment of capital” (quoted in Mark Blaug, *Economic Theory in Retrospect* [Cambridge University, 1997]).

In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx rejected all underconsumptionist/over-productionist theories then current. He stated:

“There are not too many necessities of life produced, in proportion to the existing population. Quite the reverse. Too little is produced to decently and humanely satisfy the wants of the great mass....

“Too many means of labour and necessities of life are produced at times to permit of their serving as means for the exploitation of labourers at a certain rate of profit.”

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the underconsumptionist theory was revived and popularized by Keynes, who claimed Malthus as an intellectual forerunner. The root cause of the contraction of production was, according to this doctrine, a lack of “effective demand.” Keynes and his followers advocated that the shortfall in effective demand be made up by increased government spending on public works and social programs beneficial to working people (e.g., unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, socialized medicine, income transfers to the poor). This old-line Keynesian program is propagated in the U.S. today by the liberal economist Paul Krugman in his *New York Times* columns. If, as Foster (in line with Keynes and Krugman) contends, the cause of the economic downturn is a lack of effective demand, then expanded deficit spending would be effective in restoring production to full capacity, with full employment of labor.

However, throughout the capitalist world, government policies are moving in just the opposite direction. Fiscal austerity is the order of the day from Obama’s America to Cameron’s Britain, Merkel’s Germany and the entire euro zone. Krugman explains the drive for fiscal austerity as a triumph of right-wing ideology over economic good sense. In a piece in the *New York Review of Books* (6 June) titled “How the Case for Austerity Has Crumbled,” he asserts: “The case for austerity was and is one that many powerful people want to believe, leading them to seize on anything that looks like a justification.”

In fact, fiscal austerity does serve the interests of the capitalist class. Cuts to government-provided social programs reduce the overhead costs of production broadly defined and therefore contribute to a higher rate of profit. It is crucial for the working masses to wage class struggle to beat back this austerity offensive. In the course of such struggles, workers must be won to the understanding that the tendency toward immiseration of the proletariat will be ended only with the expropriation of the expropriators through socialist revolution.

Climate Change in Perspective

As Marxist opponents of the capitalist order, our role is not to serve as economic advisers to the bourgeoisie. Rather, we strive to educate the working class about its historic interest in sweeping away capitalism and establishing its own class rule. The reformist “socialists” are die-hard opponents of this program. With the destruction of the Soviet Union—a catastrophe that was hailed by the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and many others—they have increasingly junked even a hypocritical posture toward the goal of getting rid of capitalism. And now they have latched on to the cause of “climate justice” to urge the capitalist exploiters to moderate their behavior. As ISO climate-change guru Chris Williams baldly put it: “Uniting social and ecological demands into one unified movement independent of mainstream politicians has the power to change state policy at the national level” (*Socialist Worker*, 26 June). This is the calling card of the System Change Not Climate Change (SCNCC) coalition, in which the ISO is a driving force.

It is true that the Earth as a whole today is hotter than it was a century ago, and human activity—e.g., the combustion of fossil fuels—is largely responsible for the growing atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. One authoritative scientific review noted: “Through his worldwide industrial civilization, Man is unwittingly conducting a vast geophysical experiment. Within a few generations he is burning the fossil fuels that slowly accumulated in the earth over the past 500 million years. The CO₂ produced by this combustion is being injected into the atmosphere; about half of it remains there.” It continues: “The climatic changes that may be produced by the increased CO₂ content could be deleterious from the point of view of human beings.” This report,

“Restoring the Quality of Our Environment,” was submitted to the Johnson administration in 1965.

The experiment continues to this day. For environmentalists, the answer is to cut industrial civilization down to size and keep fossil fuels in the ground. For Marxists, it is to replace the unwitting conduct with conscious and informed planning. One must also keep in mind that the ultimate impact of the current warming trend, which encompasses a wide range of possibilities and could vary significantly from place to place, is not much more definitively known today than it was a half century ago.

The eco-socialists, though, hold aloft the most calamitous projections as scientific gospel. At the Left Forum held in New York City this June, several speakers referred to climate change as the worst crisis humanity has ever faced. Foster’s comments at its closing plenary were titled “The Epochal Crisis.” *Nation* writer Christian Parenti even invoked the runaway greenhouse effect that transformed Venus into the hottest planet in the solar system. Far from a clarion call to uproot production for private profit, such fear-mongering has one purpose: to sell various schemes for rolling back the use of hydrocarbons under capitalism.

Current climate change may or may not pose a sustained, long-term threat to human society. As long as the capitalist masters call the shots, it truly is a roll of the dice. Environmental degradation is just one of a host of problems, many far more pressing, linked to the workings of the capitalist system: unemployment and extreme poverty, mass starvation, imperialist military adventures and conquest, the reinforcing of social backwardness (interethnic bloodletting, the subjugation of women in the family, etc.), to name a few. Without a doubt, the gravest threat to mankind is the nuclear arsenal in the hands of the U.S. imperialist overlords. Even a regional nuclear war, say between India and Pakistan, could wipe out many millions of people while making the Earth a colder, hungrier planet.

To elevate climate change above all else is a convenient excuse for joining hands with the bourgeoisie—the very class behind *all* these crimes. Counting carbon as a measure of progressive policy is its corollary. For the 800,000 years preceding recorded human history, the atmospheric carbon dioxide level never exceeded 300 parts per million (ppm); today it is around 400 ppm. By comparison, in the Jurassic period when the dinosaurs

reigned supreme, the concentration was likely in the neighborhood of 2,000 ppm. According to Foster:

“We need to go down to 350 parts per million, which means very big social transformations on a scale that would be considered revolutionary by anybody in society today—transformation of our whole society quite fundamentally. We have to aim at that, and we have to demand that of our society. Forget about capitalism, forget about whether the system can do it. Don’t let that be your barometer. Say this is necessary for the planet, for human survival, for justice, for environmental justice, and we just have to do it.”

—MRZine.org (30 October 2008)

One of the more active climate-justice groups based in the U.S. today is named 350.org. Despite the popularity of this numerology, decades of scientific probing of the extremely complex climate system have yet to pinpoint a carbon threshold that, if surpassed, would trigger an insoluble crisis.

By the carbon barometer, Superstorm Sandy was a blessing in disguise when it turned out the lights in the Northeast U.S., as is the Great Recession that has brought empty pockets to countless working people around the world. Likewise, capitalist Germany should be widely lauded for the more than 20 percent drop in its carbon dioxide emissions over the last two decades. Today, a quarter of the country’s total energy on average comes from so-called renewable sources—and nearly half on especially sunny days. But it still has a ways to go to match the per capita “carbon footprint” of France, where nuclear fission is the primary source of energy. These two mainstays of the imperialist European Union have in recent years squeezed the working class of Europe dry and put dependent countries like Greece through the wringer.

Some eco-socialist activists might blanch at the more distasteful implications of judging everything by carbon content. But support to reduced living standards is a part of that framework. A case in point is the carbon tax. By the ISO’s estimation, proposed legislation from Senators Barbara Boxer and Bernie Sanders that would impose a carbon fee on fossil fuel enterprises at the source (the mine, wellhead or port of entry) in order to fund renewable energy and similar technology “points in the right direction.” The bill proposes to return some of the revenues to consumers to offset the higher prices that would result when companies pass on the

cost of the tax to the public. Even so, this dividend would not cover the difference, bringing an increase in the cost of living for working people and the poor. Meanwhile, the corporations producing energy, no matter the source, will keep on rolling in money. No less an interested party than ExxonMobil has recently announced support for “a well-designed, revenue-neutral carbon tax.”

We are far from indifferent to climate change, whatever its timetable and consequences. But our primary concern is human civilization, and we are implacably hostile to its greatest enemy: the U.S. capitalist ruling class. Nothing good will come from advising these plunderers of the world on how to best generate energy. Instead, the proletariat must expropriate capitalist industry and put it at the service of society as a whole.

As we wrote in Part One of “Capitalism and Global Warming” (WV No. 965, 24 September 2010):

“When the workers of the world rule, energy will be generated and used in the most rational, efficient and safe manner possible, including by developing new energy sources. We do not rule out in advance the use of fossil fuels or any other energy source—nuclear, hydroelectric, solar, wind, etc. Simply to promote modernization and all-round development in the Third World, where today billions are locked in desperate poverty, would almost certainly involve *far greater* energy production on a global scale.”

Even if fossil fuels have not been completely phased out, a world liberated from the profit motive will have many arrows in its quiver to exert a positive influence on the climate. For example, a concerted effort could be undertaken to retool energy production and other industries and transform their operations to minimize greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the impact of warming.

Fossil Fuels and Pressure Politics

The politics of the ISO’s eco-socialist gaggle boil down to run-of-the-mill environmentalism. The “system change, not climate change” slogan was appropriated from the direct-action wing of the environmental movement. First popularized at the December 2009 protests outside the United Nations climate talks in Copenhagen, it is purposely ambiguous in order to draw in the greatest number of activists under its banner. In the

green milieu, the proposed "system change" runs the full gamut of environmentalist remedies, from curbing economic growth and discouraging the "culture of consumption" to "leaving fossil fuels in the ground" and abandoning automobiles.

The SCNCC has opted to focus its activity on "the struggle for a fossil fuel-free world," that is, pressuring the capitalist Democratic Party to wean the U.S. economy off of hydrocarbons. To much fanfare, President Barack Obama in June unveiled his "climate action plan" to curb greenhouse gas emissions, which included ordering the Environmental Protection Agency to work out new standards to limit the carbon dioxide dumped into the atmosphere by coal-fired power plants. In response, Republicans in Congress and industry magnates decried the supposed "war on coal" and warned of higher electricity costs for the mass of the population. Unions such as the United Mine Workers were angry that the plan did not even give lip service to the hardship and suffering in store for coal miners, utility workers and their families.

Although many mainstream environmentalists were jubilant, the SCNCC did not "celebrate President Obama's speech." In a July 4 statement titled "We Need a Real Plan for the Planet," the SCNCC lamented that the proposed measures "do not go nearly far enough" and counseled the White House: "Instead of an 'all of the above' energy policy, we should direct massive and exclusive funding toward renewable energy sources like wind and solar."

To argue that one source of energy is more sensible than another under the profit-driven capitalist system and its anarchic relations of production is playing with fire. Touted as a means to reduce carbon emissions, the U.S. corn ethanol biofuels racket provoked a shortfall in the food grain harvest five years ago, helping trigger a global food crisis. Solar is not without its own risks. Both the mining and processing of rare-earth metals for solar panels, and the very process of their manufacture, produce tremendous amounts of toxic sludge and contaminants that have poisoned water supplies, while the chemicals involved in making the panels pose additional hazards to workers.

A current hobbyhorse of the eco-socialists is the northern leg of the 1,700-mile Keystone XL pipeline, which would carry oil from the Alberta tar sands in Canada to the U.S. Gulf Coast. President Obama has yet to

grant approval for the section crossing the border. Supporters of Keystone consider the project key to U.S. imperialism achieving “energy independence” from Near Eastern oil; environmentalists portray it as a doomsday device.

A February anti-Keystone rally in Washington, D.C., organized by the Sierra Club and 350.org attracted tens of thousands of protesters. The week before, the ISO’s *Socialist Worker* (12 February) held out hope that this “historic event” would “send a message to the Obama administration that the time has come for real action on environmental issues.” The White House welcomes such messages, as the Commander-in-Chief made clear in his June speech on climate change: “What we need in this fight are citizens who will stand up, and speak up, and compel us to do what this moment demands.” And there you have it: the presidential seal of approval on the latest “grassroots movement.”

As to the Keystone XL pipeline, there is no reason for Marxists to either support or oppose it. In general, oil pipelines serve a socially useful function of transporting fuel. But cutting corners to boost profit margins—the name of the game for the energy barons—is deadly business. Some Native Americans oppose the pipeline out of legitimate concern that a spill would contaminate water sources that supply their reservations. By all accounts, shoddy construction, poor welds and substandard materials are features of the existing Keystone pipeline. What’s needed are fighting unions that can exert control over safety standards and practices (see “Lac-Mégantic Industrial Murder,” page 4).

Our position on the Keystone XL pipeline reflects a norm for matters relating to bourgeois energy policy. But it is not universal. In the case of the Northern Gateway pipeline, which is to run from Alberta to the British Columbia coast, our Canadian comrades rightly oppose the project, although not due to the arithmetic of greenhouse gas numbers or other environmental considerations. Rather, the proposed construction brazenly flouts the land rights of the Native peoples who are the predominant population in the remote regions that the pipeline would traverse.

Going Green on Wall Street

To the delight of the eco-socialist crowd, a gimmicky “Do the Math” speaking tour by 350.org founder Bill McKibben last year popularized calls for divesting from coal, oil and gas producers. The divestment effort has since spread to over 300 campuses around the country and found a hearing among a range of city mayors. To date, six campuses and 18 U.S. cities, including Seattle and San Francisco, have pledged to liquidate holdings in such companies.

In its article “Divest to Save the Planet” (*Socialist Worker*, 13 March), the ISO enthuses: “The struggle for divestment is part of a shift among activists away from calls for lifestyle changes and marks a new focus on the systemic nature of climate change.” In fact, this “struggle” consists of the very same strategy of moral suasion, only now directed at campus administrations and city governments. In the name of “movement building,” the ISO & Co. have thrown in their lot with a corporate-funded effort to greenwash capitalist exploitation.

The divestment campaign was orchestrated in consultation with the “progressive” Wall Street investor group Ceres. This standard-bearer of green capitalism has recently garnered support from nearly 700 companies, including General Motors and Microsoft, for a declaration that “climate change is one of America’s greatest economic opportunities of the 21st century.” Among its suggestions to fund managers is to move money into natural resources and infrastructure in “emerging markets”—i.e., promoting imperialist capital penetration into and control over the semicolonial world. Small wonder that McKibben was given a place of honor at the 2013 Ceres Conference, which drew the likes of JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Citi, Con Edison, Bloomberg, Sprint and Ford.

Amid a recent spate of criticisms of McKibben within the green milieu, the ISO’s Williams rushed to his defense in a three-part commentary titled “Questions for the Movement” (socialistworker.org, 24-26 September). Although mainly preoccupied with rationalizing the active participation of ostensible socialists in selling capitalist investment strategies (the answer has something to do with “the internal dynamics of social movements”), Williams does allow that “McKibben continues to vacillate as to whether Barack Obama and the Democratic Party can be part of the climate

solution.” He then proceeds to lament the six years of “hot air of no real consequence” coming from the White House, whose current occupant urged in his June speech: “Invest. Divest. Remind folks there’s no contradiction between a sound environment and strong economic growth.”

It was not so long ago that Williams himself was full of hope for Obama. In the “Real Solutions Right Now” chapter of his book *Ecology and Socialism* (Haymarket, 2010), Williams sketched “a government action plan on the environment” and offered: “A program such as this could even get couched as ‘a Green New Deal for the Twenty-First Century—good for the planet, good for people, good for profits.’ These proposals could *theoretically* be carried out under capitalist social relations through governmental regulation, particularly by a proactive and forward-thinking Obama administration” (emphasis in original). Reflexively, Williams adds, “Reforms that are theoretically possible under capitalism won’t be made because they ‘make sense,’ but because the politicians are forced to implement them.”

That’s the ISO (and other reformists) in a nutshell: seeking to pressure the capitalist government through the agency of the Democratic Party. Or, as in the ISO’s SCNCC activity, embracing Green Party politicians to the same effect. The fact that its Green Party allies eschew even paper-thin pretensions to socialism never mattered much to the ISO, which has even run candidates on the ticket of this bourgeois party.

“Green” Jobs and the Labor Movement

Green radicalism grew out of the New Left’s counterculture wing, which was deeply hostile to Marxism and the organized labor movement. These environmental activists advocated a dismantling of modern industrial society while expressing nothing but disdain for the working class. One prominent outfit was Earth First!, which at its 1980 founding pledged, “No compromise in defense of Mother Earth!” Its efforts included driving spikes into trees to break chain saws, a practice that put the lives and limbs of lumberjacks at risk. In road blockades outside pulp mills, eco-radicals would confront truckers and chant: “There are no jobs on a dead planet!”

This sentiment, if not the slogan itself, is today given a “worker friendly” spin by some green apostles looking for converts in the labor

bureaucracy. In a September 8 letter to AFL-CIO head Richard Trumka on the eve of the union federation’s convention, 350.org and over 60 like-minded groups pleaded: “We must shift from Jobs vs. Environment, to Jobs for the Environment.” The “Green New Deal” promulgated by the ISO’s Williams and other SCNCC eco-socialists is cut of the same cloth. Its purpose is to mask the fact that they would have jobs slashed in entire industries, even as they seek more employment in favored areas.

Extracting and processing fossil fuels is dangerous work. But a “green job” is not inherently preferable. Reflecting fears within the American ruling class that it stands to lose out in innovation and cutting-edge manufacturing to China, the Obama administration has devoted tens of billions of dollars of stimulus money to renewable energy and projects to increase energy efficiency. As a result, employment in the solar industry and the rest of the “green economy” has steadily climbed. Poor wages, benefits and working conditions prevail in these industries, with wages at many solar panel and wind turbine plants below the national average for manufacturing. Few of the workers are unionized.

One group of 62 black workers on the front lines of the “green economy” filed a racial discrimination lawsuit in 2008 against their employer, a General Electric subsidiary. The work team traveled the country, changing air filters that capture toxic particulates at power plants and other industrial sites. They were forced to work extra hours, denied adequate protection from the dangerous matter they handled and heaped with racist abuse. If the crew tried to take a break when the heat or soot became unbearable, they were derided as lazy “n-----s” and threatened with firing.

Making a “Green New Deal” with America’s bourgeois masters will do nothing to reverse the devastation of working people. Rather, it will take hard class struggle against the rapacious exploiters, including a vigorous campaign by labor to organize the mass of unorganized workers in the “green economy” and elsewhere in industry.

For International Proletarian Revolution!

If “capitalism is killing the planet,” as the SCNCC proclaims, then the ISO and its associates are doing their small part to set up the hit. We value the wonders of the natural world; however, we do not deify nature. Marxists approach the issue of climate change from the standpoint of its potential impact on human society, not preserving some imaginary natural order. Indeed, the climate, with or without humans, is constantly changing, sometimes more rapidly, sometimes less so.

From the dawn of man, our ancestors have left an imprint on the natural world, as it has on mankind. In his book *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum* (Princeton, 2005), climate scientist William Ruddiman notes:

“Advocates for the environment often frame their positions with high-minded, preachy appeals to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s notion of the ‘noble savage,’ the concept of a primitive but wise people who once lived lightly on the land and in complete harmony with the environment. They contrast this supposedly once-pristine world with the evils of heavy industrial development during the last two centuries. They portray industrial development as the first, and only, real human assault on nature....”

“The concept of a pristine natural world is a myth: preindustrial cultures had long had a major impact on the environment.”

Basically, it all started with agriculture.

Although John Bellamy Foster does not openly invoke the “noble savage,” in his version of socialist society “it will be necessary for us to live lightly on the Earth,” as he commented some years back. But precisely what separates humans out from other animals is our capacity to perform work and transform the world around us to serve our ends. In the 1883 Introduction to *Dialectics of Nature*, Friedrich Engels cogently observed: “Man alone has succeeded in impressing his stamp on nature, not only by shifting the plant and animal world from one place to another, but also by so altering the aspect and climate of his dwelling place, and even the plants and animals themselves, that the consequences of his activity can disappear only with the general extinction of the terrestrial globe.”

Nature certainly would not reciprocate if mankind were to suddenly “live lightly.” Disease and pestilence, droughts and wildfires, floods and

tsunamis, hurricanes and tornadoes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, meteor showers and gamma-ray bursts: all these features of life on Earth and more would remain. A human society that scales back technological development in the name of protecting the environment will be placed at nature’s mercy.

The way forward is a qualitative development of the world’s productive forces in an international federation of workers states. Only then can scarcity be eliminated—the precondition for the disappearance of classes and the withering away of the state. With the mass of the population no longer struggling day-to-day to survive and with modern technique, science, culture and education available to all, there would be an explosion in human creativity. Man’s stewardship of the Earth would grow by leaps and bounds.

When production is planned and directed at satisfying human need and not the profit motive, environmental considerations can be given their proper due. The vast expansion in knowledge, technologies and resources will put mankind in position to anticipate and prepare for whatever curveballs the natural world throws at it. Increasing abundance would also eliminate the material factors—and backward social values, such as those expounded by religions—that fuel population growth. No longer will poor peasants and agricultural workers be compelled to have more children in order to ensure enough manpower to work the land. The division between town and country as well as economic dependence on the family will be overcome.

To bring about a communist society, the rule of capital must first be broken, in this country and beyond. Engels elaborated in *Anti-Dühring* (1878): “To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat. To thoroughly comprehend the historical conditions and thus the very nature of this act, to impart to the now oppressed class a full knowledge of the conditions and of the meaning of the momentous act it is called upon to accomplish, this is the task of the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement, scientific socialism.”

Source:

<https://www.icl-fi.org/print/english/wv/1033/ecosocialism.html>