

An exchange on a socialist approach to the protection of the environment

10 January 2001

Dear Editors,

The quality of the articles here is wonderful and I click in and read something every chance I get. Though not well versed in things Russian, I have been a fan of Trotsky's for a long time and was glad to find a site where the anti-Stalinist view of things could be studied. I do have one question though: what would modern Socialism do about the possible coming environmental crisis? With pollution of the oceans, global warming, ozone depletion, resource depletion we just might manage to make this earthly home of ours unlivable. And what if a few years (or decades) out instead of the present 6 billion or the projected 12 billion souls our old earth will only support say only 1 billion?

From what I understand the conventional “neo-Stalinist” view is that this is just all nonsense and a trick of the capitalist world to divert attention away from “worker” issues. This view is similar to the view of the American political right. But I believe (as should anyone with eyes to see and who has taken the trouble to travel and observe) that environmental degradation is serious and real, though whether this will cause life or death problems for our masses in the near term is of course a matter for conjecture. I have seen very little on such matters in your otherwise very diverse library of material.

Just curious!

Yours truly,

SR

Dear SR,

Thank you for your letter concerning the position of the WSWS on environmental problems. Environmental degradation is certainly an important issue that needs to be addressed by anyone concerned with the future of human society and the planet we live on. The environment is not a “diversion” from workers' issues; indeed it is of special concern to the working class, since the burden of environmental catastrophe will fall primarily on its shoulders. The WSWS has written on and conducted inquiries into environmental issues, as in the investigation of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia into cancer and industrial pollution in the city of Wollongong. [<http://www.sep.org.au/cancer/index.htm>].

Our position is that the protection of the environment cannot be addressed outside of addressing who owns the means of production and in whose interests they are employed. The

technology already exists that would allow society both to provide for the material needs of the world's population, while at the same time protecting the environment. Energy, for example, can be derived from a myriad of sources with minimal damage to the environment. Production, if coordinated in a rational and internationally cooperative manner, could be developed enormously without destabilizing the ecosystem. However, this can only be achieved when the anarchy of the market and the system of competing nation-states are eliminated and production is controlled democratically and employed to serve human need, not private profit.

In our evaluation of the causes and solutions to these problems, we differ from the great majority of environmentalist organizations, including the Greens. To a great extent, they blame the development of man's productive forces for the destruction of the environment. Many also say that population growth and supposed “over-consumption” in the industrialized countries is responsible. As a result, they often propose reactionary solutions directed at the working class. In Europe, for instance, the Greens have enthusiastically endorsed the dismantling of factories, which have left thousands of workers jobless. They have also supported increases in gasoline taxes with the aim of reducing consumption.

The development of the productive forces throughout human history—and, specifically, under capitalism—has led to an extraordinary growth in the ability of mankind to master the natural environment and use its resources to fulfill human needs. This ability has allowed us to develop medicines, improve the efficiency and dependability of food production, escape from the immediate impact of fluctuations in the natural environment, and, in general, raise the cultural and technological level of human existence. This process, however, is not a one-sided appropriation of resources by humans of a static natural world. Rather it is a dynamic interaction, in which the natural environment is transformed by human activity, which itself forms part of this natural world. As we have expanded over the face of the globe and have increased our productive capacity, we have likewise increased the extent to which our activity alters the rest the environment.

The development of the productive forces, however, takes place within the framework of changing social—i.e., class—relations, which place constraints on the use and further

development of these achievements. For example, the introduction of the assembly line made possible the mass production of the automobile, a development of a fundamentally progressive character, vastly increasing the means and facility of transportation, which in turn led to improved living standards, the breaking down of parochial barriers and raising of human culture. This increase in productive ability, however, occurred within the social relations of capitalism, in which the effects of automobile use on the environment (global warming, smog, etc.) cannot be seriously addressed.

The most rapid development of human productive capacity hitherto has occurred over the last several centuries, that is, since the triumph of capitalist relations over a backward and stagnant feudal structure. At the same time, capitalism is completely unable to rationally control the forces that it has called into being, and this has profound effects on environmental degradation. The solution, however, is not to turn back the clock to a more primitive mode of existence, but rather to liberate the productive capacities developed by capitalism from the social relations in which they are constrained.

Following from this analysis, we reject the conception advanced by some environmentalists that technology itself is the problem, and therefore the solution is to halt the development of the productive forces. Such an arresting of human development is neither possible nor, because it prevents the further development of human society, desirable. Indeed, it is of a profoundly reactionary character, a perspective characteristic of the petty-bourgeoisie that longs for a largely imagined past utopia of small-scale production and consumption. If taken to its logical conclusion the perspective advanced by those hostile to technological development is advocating the destruction of large-scale industries, depopulation of the cities, glorification of peasant life and other reactionary proposals akin to those tried by Pol Pot in Cambodia.

It is this backward-looking perspective that has led many environmentalist organizations to embrace economic nationalism and support the strengthening of the nation-state. Equating the globalization of production—which is inherently progressive—with the capitalist property relations under which this process has taken place, groups have allied themselves with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and right-wing politicians like Patrick Buchanan to demand trade war measures against China, Mexico and other countries. Far from opposing the operations of global capitalism this outlook weakens the only social force capable of fighting it—the international working class—by fostering national divisions and animosities.

Similarly, we reject the Malthusian idea that environmental problems arise from human population growth. This perspective, hinted at in your letter, holds that population increases to a certain point, at which time it comes into conflict

with nature, either through some form of natural catastrophe, disease, or simply poverty. Numerical population is abstracted from the social relations in which humans exists, thereby constructing a justification for these relations and for reactionary programs such as immigration restrictions—which was debated within the leadership of the Sierra Club. There are those who go even further, such as Dave Foreman, a founder of Earth First!, who suggest that disease, famine and civil war in Africa serve a positive good by reducing population.

As was suggested above, while rejecting attempts to turn back the productive forces, we do not harbor any illusions as to the possibility of a “green” or “environmentally friendly” capitalism, as suggested by such figures as US Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader. Even the most environmentally-conscious employer enters a network of economic relations that are beyond his or her control. The capitalist system, by its very nature, subordinates human and social needs, including the maintenance of a healthy environment, to the drive for ever-greater amounts of personal wealth. Under constant pressure from big investors, only those corporations that cut production costs the most and maximize profits can survive. Given these conditions, the environment can be considered in only the most superficial manner.

Capitalism further precludes the ability to address the environment in that it remains tied to a system of competing nation-states. Environmental problems are inherently global in nature and must be addressed on a global scale. Only by cooperatively mobilizing the world's scientific, technological and economic resources can such an immense challenge be confronted. The international agreements that have been reached, such as the Kyoto agreement on global warming, are generally of an extremely weak character, and even these have floundered on the rocks of national competition. The problems created by the development of production under capitalism can be solved only through the rational and international control of production, i.e., the conscious direction of the dynamic interaction between man and the rest of the natural world.

I hope that this response answers some of your questions in relation to the position of the WSWWS on environmental problems. We encourage you and all readers to contribute your thoughts to the web site on this important part of a socialist perspective.

Sincerely,
Joseph Kay
10 January 2001

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>