

Marxism, socialism and climate change

By Nick Beams
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Public meetings called by the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) in Sydney and Melbourne last week exposed the real agenda behind emissions trading schemes and the official climate change “debate”.

WSWS international editorial board member and SEP national secretary Nick Beams and WSW writer Patrick O’Connor delivered reports to audiences of students, workers, professional people and retired workers on “The Economics and Politics of the ETS: Socialism and Climate Change”.

Against the backdrop of the national conflicts and rivalries dominating the Copenhagen climate change conference, the reports demonstrated that only the socialist re-organisation of economic life on an international scale could harness the immense resources and technology needed to avert the developing ecological and social catastrophe.

The following is the report delivered by Nick Beams. The report delivered by Patrick O’Connor was published on December 21.

The issue we are discussing at this meeting—the impact of global climate change—concerns nothing less than the future of human civilisation. The problems are so profound and far-reaching that, to be resolved, they require the mobilisation of all available economic, material, scientific and technical resources.

If the current situation is not rapidly reversed, then humanity faces a catastrophe. This will not be some single event, but rather an ongoing worsening of social and economic conditions: drought, increasingly violent weather events, mass population movements, conflicts over land and water resources, and wars, even involving the use of nuclear weapons.

Lest anyone mistakenly think that I am indulging in some kind of socialist catastrophitis, let me quote from a report by the high-powered American think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), prepared in November 2007.

The report begins by noting that “the scientific community has been shocked at how fast some effects of global warming are unfolding, which suggests that many of the estimates considered most probable have been too conservative.” Nothing has happened in the past two years to alter that conclusion. In fact, the tendency noted by the CSIS has become even more apparent. The report sets out three scenarios based on expected, severe and catastrophic climate change.

Under the expected scenario, based on an average global temperature increase of 1.3 degrees Celsius by 2040, outcomes include: “[H]eightened internal and cross-border tensions caused by large-scale migrations, conflicts sparked by resource scarcity, particularly in the weak and failing states of Africa; increased disease proliferation, which will have economic consequences; and some geopolitical reordering as nations adjust to shifts in resources and prevalence of disease.”

Remember, this was written by a national security think tank that provides advice to US government authorities, and so when it refers to “geopolitical reordering”, it has in mind actions of the kind that have been carried out in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Under the scenario of severe climate change, a not unlikely situation, in which average global temperature increases by 2.6 degrees Celsius by 2040, “massive non-linear events in the global environment give rise to

massive nonlinear societal events.” The report warns that “nations around the world will be overwhelmed by the scale of change and the pernicious challenges, such as pandemic disease.” The internal cohesion of nations, including the US, will be under great stress as a result of migration, changes in agricultural patterns and the availability of water. “The flooding of coastal communities around the world, especially in the Netherlands, the United States, South Asia, and China, has the potential to challenge regional and even national identities. Armed conflicts between nations over resources, such as the Nile and its tributaries, are likely and nuclear war is possible... In this scenario, climate change provokes a permanent shift in the relationship of humankind to nature.”

The catastrophic scenario, where average global temperature rises 5.6 degrees Celsius by the year 2100, would see a world like that depicted in the movie *Mad Max* “only hotter, with no beaches, and perhaps even more chaos.” “The collapse and chaos associated with extreme climate change would destabilise virtually every aspect of modern life.” The only comparable scenario, according to the study, was the situation that would have resulted from a US-Soviet nuclear war.

There is a stark contrast between the serious and rapidly worsening climate change situation and the deliberations of so-called “world leaders” at the Copenhagen climate change summit. It would take far longer than the time we have available here to go into all the twists, turns and manoeuvres at the conference. But the essential issues are clear: the summit is not about tackling climate change. It is a gathering at which the major powers are working to create conditions where they can shove the problem onto their rivals and secure the best outcome for themselves.

A report by Johann Hari in the December 11 edition of the British newspaper the *Independent* summed up the event as follows: “Every delegate to the Copenhagen summit is being greeted by the sight of a vast fake planet dominating the city’s central square. This swirling globe is covered with corporate logos—the Coke brand is stamped over Africa, while Carlsberg appears to own Asia, and McDonald’s announces ‘I’m loving it!’ in great red letters above. ‘Welcome to Hopenhagen!’ it cries. It is kept in the sky by endless blasts of hot air. This plastic planet is the perfect symbol for this summit. The world is being told that this is an emergency meeting to solve the climate crisis—but here inside the Bella Centre where our leaders are gathering, you can find only a corrupt shuffling of words, designed to allow countries to wriggle out of the bare minimum necessary to prevent the unravelling of the biosphere.”

One of the more egregious examples of this corrupt process involves the efforts of the Rudd Labor government to ensure an agreement that would enable Australia and other countries with large agricultural areas, in particular the United States and Canada, to “offset” their carbon emissions against increased absorption of carbon by the soil. As a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, because these countries have hundreds of millions of hectares of land “very small increases in soil carbon could generate huge reductions in their net emissions”. This could prove very important for Australia, as the latest figures show that its greenhouse gas emissions have risen by 82 percent since 1990. Looking at these and other, similar, reports, one wonders whether perhaps some ironist decided that Copenhagen, the home town of Hans Christian

Andersen, the author of fairy tales, would be the most appropriate venue for the conference.

In examining the farce at Copenhagen the following question arises: is the manifest refusal of governments, in the face of all the evidence and warnings from their own advisors, to respond effectively to this crisis a product of individual regimes, personalities, leaders and so on, or is it in fact rooted in the very structure of the present economic and political order—a structure that makes impossible a solution within the existing framework. Depending on how one answers this questions, very different political perspectives flow.

Johann Hari clearly recognises that the Copenhagen summit is a fraud—a “con” is his terminology. But he nevertheless holds out the prospect that if the movement demanding action becomes big enough and strident enough, if the political temperature is raised sufficiently, then a viable regime can be established to reduce the physical temperature, with a global environmental court taking action against any nations that refuse to make real and rapid cuts. At the risk of sounding too harsh, such a perspective, aimed at pressuring the various capitalist governments into action, is a fairy tale. Let us review the basic structures of the global capitalist system in order to make clear why.

Climate change and the contradictions of global capitalism

As soon as we begin to consider climate change, two things become apparent. The first is that, by its very nature, the problem is global and no national solution is possible. The second is that the productive activity of man, that is the development of economic and social life, cannot be considered outside of mankind’s relationship to nature. Or, to put it another way, there is no separation between the activities of mankind, a part and product of nature, and the rest of nature, upon which mankind depends. Mankind’s productive activity must be carried out, not independent of, but in accordance with, the laws of nature. In considering these questions, however, we run headlong into the very foundations of the global capitalist order.

Take the issue of the nation-state system. Marxism long ago pointed to the contradiction between the development of the global economy under capitalism and the division of the world into conflicting nation states. That contradiction exploded nearly 100 years ago in the form of World War I. The expansion of the world economy over the preceding four decades had given rise to a conflict between the major capitalist powers for markets, profits and resources.

The same contradiction has been on display in the wake of the global financial crisis. The response of every capitalist power to the crisis that erupted one year ago was to put in place measures to protect its own economy and financial system above all else. Now it has emerged to the surface once again at the Copenhagen summit, as each of the major powers attempts to shove off the costs of climate change onto its rivals, minimise its own costs and secure the maximum benefits from any emissions trading system that may be established.

In his book *Commonwealth, Economics for a Crowded Planet*, the American economist Jeffrey Sachs pointed to the significance of this issue for the survival of civilisation. “The defining challenge of the twenty-first century,” he wrote, “will be to face the reality that humanity shares a common fate on a crowded planet. That common fate will require new forms of global co-operation, a fundamental point of blinding simplicity that many world leaders have yet to understand or embrace... In the twenty-first century our global society will flourish or perish according to our ability to find common ground across the world on a set of shared objectives and on practical means to achieve them.”

Sachs warned that a “clash of civilisations” could develop over rising tensions fueled by scarce energy resources, economic inequalities, and environmental problems, which “could be our last and utterly devastating clash.” He continued: “The paradox of a unified global economy and

divided global society poses the greatest single threat to the planet because it makes impossible the cooperation needed to address the remaining challenges. A clash of civilisations, if we survived one, would undo all that humanity has built and would cast a shadow for generations to come.” Sachs, a committed opponent of Marxism, is nevertheless forced to recognise that the central contradiction of the world capitalist system identified by Marxists, threatens the very existence of mankind.

But having pointed to the problem, what solution did Sachs propose? Merely the vague hope that a new John F. Kennedy would emerge and inaugurate an era of international co-operation like that which accompanied the nuclear test ban treaty of 1963. Attempts to conjure up some great leader—Sachs clearly had Obama in mind when he wrote his book in 2008—who will inspire global co-operation simply ignore the fact that the nation-state system is not some kind of snake skin that can simply be cast off. It provides the structural foundation for the capitalist political economy.

The so-called “world leaders” gathered in Copenhagen represent the interests of their “own” nation-states and of the capitalist class whose interests those states serve. And those interests conflict and collide with the other capitalist great powers. As Obama emphasised in his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, he represents the American nation-state and acts in its interests. The nation-state system can no more be reshaped or re-fashioned to meet the new requirements of global humanity than could the system of feudal states be accommodated to the growth of the productive forces that took place with the emergence of capitalism. The feudal state system had to be overturned by the bourgeoisie. Now the global working class must overturn the capitalist nation-state system in order that humanity can overcome the problems it confronts and resume its historical progress.

But even if the problems caused by the nation-state are acknowledged, is it not possible to overcome them through the establishment of some kind of global market mechanism that will force the various nations to act in the common good? Through the market, it is argued, we could have the “greening of capitalism”. The radical solutions advanced by the socialists are therefore not necessary. Let us consider these claims.

In his 2006 report on climate change, the former World Bank economist Nicholas Stern acknowledged that global warming and the dangers it posed were the outcome of the greatest market failure in history. But the “solutions” advocated by governments and their committees of experts around the world, propose to use the market to deal with the very problem that it has created. No one asked the obvious question: if the market produced this disaster, what other catastrophes does it have in store? The so-called experts were silent, but the market itself spoke loud and clear. Little more than a year after Stern’s report, the market mechanisms of the global financial system brought about the greatest financial crash in three quarters of a century, pointing to the fact that billions of people all over the world now live and work in an economic system over which they have no control and which threatens to plunge them into poverty at any time, without warning. As we shall see, the global financial crisis has the same structure as the crisis of global warming. The mass of humanity is threatened by the results of its own economic activity over which, however, it has no control, under the present socio-economic order.

Marx and humanity’s relationship with nature

A frequent argument advanced by various representatives of so-called “green” political tendencies is that, despite the obvious connection between the operation of the capitalist system, based on private ownership of the means of production, and the drive for profit, which forms the dynamic of this system, Marxism has no answer to the problem of climate change because it is wedded to the development of the productive forces, which is the source of the problem. Such arguments serve a definite political purpose. They are aimed at turning all those people, especially

young people, who have begun to raise concerns about the operations of the capitalist economy, away from the development of a socialist perspective and back into the arms of the bourgeoisie and its parties, or into an attempt to find individualistic solutions. An example of this latter genre is a recently-published book by Raj Patel, entitled *The Value of Nothing*. Enthusiastically endorsed by the author Naomi Klein, the book calls for a “rebalancing” of market society. How is such a goal to be achieved? According to Patel, the problem really lies in ourselves. We must focus on “the plucking out of desire from our hearts” by developing a middle path, based on a “Buddhist theory of value”. Patel does not want to be seen to be advocating some kind of lifestyle cult and so claims that Buddhism provides insights into changes in the wider world. According to Patel, the Dalai Lama himself has taken a stand on his preferred economic system, and has dubbed himself a “Marxist monk” and a “Buddhist Marxist”. I raise this example in order to make clear where the rejection of a political and social struggle against capitalism must inevitably lead ... back to mysticism and religion, while laying the blame for the crisis on our own “desires”.

An examination of Marx’s work shows that, far from being outdated, as claimed by the “greens” and their ideologues, the great revolutionist provides the basic methodological framework and analysis without which this crisis cannot be understood, much less tackled and resolved. Marx, of course, did not deal directly with the problem of climate change. But he did deal with the social relations of capitalism and their impact on man’s relationship with nature, out of which this crisis has arisen.

At the beginning of Chapter 7 of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx provides an important analysis of the labour process: “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature.” Labour, Marx explains, is a nature-imposed necessity. The issue is not whether man engages in labour, in productive activity. He has to, out of necessity. The question is: how does that process take place? It is through labour that man “controls the metabolism between himself and nature.” Central to the concept of “metabolism” is the idea that it is the basis on which a complex set of interactions takes place, enabling life and growth.

While the problem of climate change had not emerged when Marx wrote, the impact of capitalism upon the natural environment was apparent, giving rise to major problems in the sphere of agriculture, problems that remain to this day.

The social relations of capitalism are based, in the final analysis, on the buying and selling of labour-power, or the capacity to work, in the market. Markets existed long before capitalism. Historically, however, the market and commodity production did not become the dominant form of economic organisation until production was carried out on the basis of wage-labour, that is when labour power came onto the market.

How did this social system arise? How did wage labour emerge? Clearly, these are not products of nature, but of historical development. Wage-labour emerged when the immediate producers had been separated from the means of production—first of all from the land and nature—and had no way of meeting their needs other than by selling their labour power to the owners of the means of production and the land. It is this separation of man and nature, a metabolic rift, that lies at the root of the crisis of climate change.

This metabolic rift made its initial appearance in the sphere of agriculture. At the conclusion of Chapter 15 of Volume 1 of *Capital* Marx writes: “Capitalist production collects the population together in great centres, and causes the urban population to achieve an ever-growing preponderance. This has two results. On the one hand it concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e., it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form

of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil. Thus it destroys at the same time the physical health of the urban worker, and the intellectual life of the rural worker.” [1] The waste products of the great cities were not returned to the land but dispersed, leading to a decline in the fertility of the soil that had to be restored by other means. Today, this is carried out via manufactured nitrogenous fertilisers, creating new sets of problems in the form of water run offs.

Global warming, the result of the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere at a rate faster than can be reabsorbed, is a further development of the processes delineated by Marx in relation to capitalist agriculture. What is the solution? Marx pointed to it as follows: “The capitalist mode of production completes the disintegration of the primitive familial union which bound agriculture and manufacture together when they were both at an undeveloped and childlike stage. But at the same time it creates the material conditions for a new and higher synthesis, a union of agriculture and industry on the basis of the forms that have developed during the period of their antagonistic isolation.” [2] The solution to the crisis lies not in a return to the past—that is impossible in any case—but the establishment of a higher social and economic order.

Such a synthesis can be achieved only through the overturn of capitalist property relations, based on the private ownership of the means of production and the nation-state system, and the bringing of the productive forces under the collective and democratic control of society as a whole. In Volume III of *Capital* Marx put the issue as follows: “Freedom ... can consist only in this, that socialised man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.” [3] In earlier periods such passages from Marx might have been passed over as some kind of fanciful vision of the future. No longer. The perspective outlined here must form the basis for tackling and resolving the ever-growing problems caused by the rift between man and nature that has been created by capitalism. Far from Marx being outdated, the world has, so to speak, caught up with Marx.

All the “solutions” advanced by the “green” opponents of Marxism have this in common. Opposing the overthrow of the capitalist system by means of the socialist revolution as the key to resolving the problems of global warming, either as “unrealistic,” not immediate enough, or because of some alleged hostility of socialism to nature, they advance a perspective which, in the final analysis, advocates cutting back the productive forces, above all the human population itself. In other words, in rejecting Marxism and its program for the establishment of new and higher social relations of production, they align themselves historically with the reactionary cleric and apologist for capitalism, Thomas Malthus, who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, sought to rule out prospects for human progress on the grounds that the growth of population outran the resources available to society.

Our examination of Marx’s analysis explains why all the so-called market solutions, rather than resolving this crisis, can only compound it. Of course, these measures are, on the face of it, absurd. They maintain that pollution can be overcome by creating a market in rights and permits to pollute. Even if, by some miracle never before witnessed in any other market, all the false accounting and corrupt methods were eliminated from the carbon market, the fundamental problem would remain. The system of market relations is based on the separation of the producers from the means of production, and it is this separation—the metabolic rift between man and nature—that is the source of the crisis.

Science, technology and capitalism

Analysis of the structural foundations of global capitalism also makes clear why no technological solution is possible within the framework of the profit system. This is not to say that it is beyond the scientific capacity and ingenuity of mankind to develop new technologies, which can begin to tackle this problem and open the way to a solution. But such measures will require global co-operation and collaboration between scientists, researchers, institutions and the population as a whole, on a level that is impossible within the present social order. A moment's consideration shows why. New technologies in this area would be the source of enormous profits. That is why the results of research and technological breakthroughs will be jealously guarded. But a regime that places barriers to the free flow of information and the results of research is inimical to the development of science. Under conditions where universities and scientific institutions are forced to rely on corporate sponsorship, information cannot be freely shared. Nor can research findings be completely trusted, given that one is not sure who exactly is paying for the results. Isaac Newton once said: "if I have seen further, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants". Today, scientific research is subject to the principle of "user pays".

Overcoming the dangers to human civilisation posed by global warming is inseparably bound up with the struggle for international socialism, that is, for a program based on the overthrow of the system of private ownership and national states. The world economy must be brought under the democratic control of the associated producers, in other words, the international working class—blue collar, white collar, professional, non-professional. Only then can it be controlled and regulated to meet human need, including the need for a sustainable environment. The dictates of profit must be overturned and the laws of reason applied to social and economic relationships.

Confronted with this perspective, the defenders of the present order rush to the barricades. In the past they would have invoked the name of God. That is no longer viable, so they claim that conscious control and regulation of the economy is simply impossible.

Martin Wolf, the economics commentator of the *Financial Times*, is one such defender. He is not a climate change denier, nor an uncritical defender of the capitalist market, which, he insists, must be subject to certain controls. However, he maintains that, for all its faults, no other economic system is possible. Writing on November 10, on the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, he insisted that this event had "ended ... the delusion of a rationally planned economy". Leaving aside the question of the Stalinist economies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which, as we have explained, were neither socialist nor rationally planned, Wolf's remarks raise a more general issue.

Consider the implications of what he is saying. Mankind is able to probe the furthest corners of the universe, reaching back in time almost to the Big Bang. At the micro level, mankind has penetrated the structure of life, mapping the genetic structure of the human race itself. The science of quantum mechanics has made possible vast advances in computer and information technology, creating the conditions for the exchange of information on a global scale virtually instantaneously, not to speak of music, literature and film. Mankind is able to do all this and much more, but it cannot subject its own economic and social organisation to conscious control and regulation in order to meet human need. Wolf's thesis that the laws of reason can, and indeed must, be deployed in every area of human endeavour, except the organisation of economic and social life, is simply an absurdity.

Rational democratic control and regulation of the economy, ending the domination of the blind workings of the market, is not merely a matter of preference. It is a necessity. I noted earlier the similarity between the structure of the global financial crisis and the climate change crisis. I shall now return to this issue.

In 2007-2008 the operations of the financial markets plunged the world

economy into the most serious crisis since the Great Depression. Suddenly, the lives of billions of people the world over were threatened. And the crisis is far from over. Indeed, there are clear indications that further financial storms, potentially even more devastating, are in the making. At the same time, governments everywhere are preparing massive budget spending cuts to make the working class and ordinary people pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars handed out in the first round of bank bailouts.

How did this disaster happen? No one wanted it, no one organised it—not even those who were able to benefit from it. It simply erupted from the operation of the market. But what is the market? It is not some kind of evil world spirit that periodically inflicts a catastrophe upon mankind, as if somehow to punish the human race for its sins. The market is the outcome of the collective economic activity of humanity as a whole. But it rules over society, outside the conscious control of anyone. Our modes of expression reflect this. We talk about the market doing this and that, frequently resorting to weather analogies—clouds on the economic horizon, storms brewing and so on.

The form of the climate change crisis is the same. Mankind is threatened by the outcome of its own economic activity, over which it has no control. Let us assume that all the so-called world leaders assembled today at the Copenhagen summit genuinely want to achieve an agreement to reduce greenhouse gases. They are unable to do so, because of the structure of the economic system over which they preside. The debacle of Copenhagen is yet another indication that this system has become the greatest danger to the continuation of human civilisation and must be overturned.

But then we confront the argument of those who say they agree with our general analysis of the necessity for socialism, but insist that this will take too long and something has to be done "right now". Socialism may be all well and good, as a general aim, but the fight for a socialist perspective cannot deal with problems, such as climate change, that have to be tackled immediately. Such arguments are generally advanced under the banner of "realism". In fact they constitute the most unrealistic perspective of all. The Copenhagen conference will no doubt declare that climate change represents a great danger, that it is a very important issue, that something must be done. Indeed, it is so serious that a conference will be convened next year in Mexico—to discuss it again!

The overthrow of capitalism and the socialist transformation of society will not be easy. It will involve many twists and turns. It will demand sacrifice and commitment, because it is the most difficult and complex task in human history. But it is propelled by powerful and irresolvable contradictions at the heart of the capitalist system—a system that, having once played a decisive role in the advance of human civilisation, now quite literally threatens it with destruction. Realism! It is most unrealistic to believe that somehow, some way, if only enough pressure is applied, the capitalist system can be reformed in such a way as to provide a future for the next generation and all the generations to come.

Let me conclude with Marx's summing up of the issue: "From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* [good heads of the household]." [4] Such a perspective is only possible on the basis of the program for which our party, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and the Socialist Equality Party, fights. I urge you to join its ranks.

Notes:

1. *Capital*, Volume I, p. 637
2. *Ibid*, p. 637

3. *Capital*, Volume III, p. 959.

4. *Ibid*, p. 911.

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