

Marxism Today

Capitalism in crisis - in more ways than one

by N. K.

In the first decade of the 21st Century, scientists of different disciplines are alerting people and governments to a second crisis of capitalism, a crisis bigger than the current economic crisis. That crisis is the destruction of the environment caused by the 'growth at all costs' logic of capitalism.

The enormity of the crisis is summarised in the following statement by the Swedish Talberg Foundation 2008 Report, *Grasping The Climate Crisis; A Provocation*:

"The world at present faces a breakdown of the global financial system. The consequences are staggering, with ripple effects the world over that deliver the severest blows to the poor. Fear is rising. One would have expected somewhat of the same level of anxiety with regard to the looming breakdown of major parts of the Earth system - rapid deforestation, overfishing, freshwater scarcity and the disappearing Arctic sea ice. Reports of such events and processes are abundant, but the level of concern is still conspicuously low."

Not only is the level of concern amongst capitalists low, so is their investment in dollars towards remedies to the environmental crisis.

This is a point emphasised by the Bolivian President, Evo Morales in November 2008, "The earth is much more important than the stock exchanges of Wall Street and the world financial system. Yet while the United States and the European Union allocate 4,100 billion dollars to save the bankers from financial crisis that they themselves have caused, programs on climate change get 313 times less, that is to say, only 13 billion dollars."

The pace of climate change

Central to the environmental crisis is global warming, caused by the alarming rise

in CO₂ emissions in to the atmosphere coinciding with the development of capitalism.

One of the world's leading climate researchers, Dr James Hansen at NASA, now believes that restricting the concentration of greenhouse gases to 450ppm (as per the last IPCC Report) is not enough and that we must aim for 300ppm.

This is because new research shows that a doubling of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere risks a 6 degree increase in temperature, not a 3 degree increase as previously thought.

"A 6 degree increase in temperature would fundamentally affect the conditions for life on Earth and would be no less than a global disaster". (Brian Walker, Director of the international network of scientists, Resilience Alliance).

Hansen's views are echoed by other scientists such as John Schellnhuber, director of Germany's Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and an advisor to the European Union. He said that "even a small increase in temperature could trigger one of several climatic tipping points, such as methane released from melting permafrost and bring much more severe global warming".

Start from the science

Marx and Engels studied a broad range of scientific material as a basis for developing their ideas, not only about the inner workings of capitalism, but also about the interaction of capitalism and the environment.

Marx commented in *Capital Vol. 3* that, "From the standpoint of higher socio-economic formation, the private property of 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 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)."

We disrupt the natural ecosystem at our peril, Engels warned. "Let us not, however, flatter ourselves over much on account of our human victories over nature. For each victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel out the first."

An example of this dialectical process is the internal combustion engine and capitalist development of fossil - fuel - reliant, privately owned cars. A human victory in improving and speeding up transportation has resulted in contributing to the tipping point of global warming, through increased greenhouse gas emissions.

The anarchy of capitalism, and competition between individual capitalists and between capitalist powers, means that the capitalist state, at the national and international level, cannot enforce the required discipline on the class it serves to solve the environmental crisis facing humanity.

One only has to look at the state's inability to enforce economic discipline amongst capitalists in the current crisis of overproduction.

Only the people can save the environment and humanity

Events in South America over the last decade demonstrate that there is an alternative to the naked rule of imperialism (global capitalism).

Countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia, led by anti-imperialist governments and backed by mass mobilisation of the people, have scored significant victories against imperialism to take control of their own destiny.



Evo Morales at the UN General assembly

This shift in political power is a precondition for significant protection of the environment by the people and for sustainable economic development.

Here in Australia there is already a growing, active people's movement for protection of the environment. The people's movement includes many groups active against pulp mills, de-salination plants, privatisation of the Murray Darling basin water supply and opposition to mining expansion on indigenous homelands. Indeed, the opposition to the Intervention in the NT is, to a significant degree, opposition to freer access to indigenous lands for mining companies.

Faced with this rising tide of people's concern, the Rudd Government does not know which way to turn, but falls back on a fear campaign that action against global warming

has to be 'balanced' against preserving jobs. This is at a time when capitalists across the world shed millions of jobs anyway and at the same time reap the short term benefits of governments' indecisive action against climate change.

We should not fall into the trap that people's jobs come before the environment.

People's jobs depend on an end to pollution of the environment, the development of environmentally sustainable industries and production based on people's needs, not private profit.

Perhaps it is fitting for Evo Morales, an indigenous person who leads the Bolivian people, to have the last word. "Humankind is capable of saving the earth if we recover the principles of solidarity, complementarity, and harmony with nature, in contraposition to the reign of competition, profits, and rampant consumption of natural resources."