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Labour and climate change: Towards an emancipatory, ecological class-consciousness¹

To fight climate change ‘we need everyone’, the New York City People’s Climate March claimed, but perhaps those we need most are the workers. We need workers and their organisations, and the labour movement to be on the side of the climate movement. This is because work is the fundamental interface between society and nature. All kinds of work: productive, reproductive, service, care, intellectual and immaterial work, all preside over and regulate social metabolism, the exchange of materials and energy that sustains human life. Labour is not in command of this process, however, for capital is in charge in what eco-Marxists call the second contradiction of

capitalism: the relationship between capital and nature. As a result, workers are often forced to endure all sorts of unsustainable, unhealthy and ecologically destructive work, in order to obtain a wage that allows them to survive in the market economy. This second contradiction takes place in workers’ bodies, and in their working and living environments (Barca 2012).

But two other major factors need to be taken into account.

As feminist political economy has reminded us, not all work is controlled by capital and the market. In fact, this may be only the tip of the ice-

berg, made up largely of non-alienated work done outside the capitalist wage-labour system including: social service sectors, household work, community or kinship, cooperatives, charity establishments, through bartering or alternative currency, and small-scale or subsistence agriculture (Gibson-Graham 2006).

This is a promising starting point for an ecological revolution, i.e. a revolution in the way production, reproduction and consciousness interact with each other, as theorized by many ecofeminist and agroecology scholars and activists, who consider food autonomy as the revolution’s point zero

(Merchant 1987; Federici 2012). Therefore, if ecology can become a platform for a new (international) labour agenda, and if labour can become a leading subject of climate mobilisation, then reverting primitive accumulation would be a good place to start. Primitive accumulation has historically led to the separation of workers from the land and the overexploitation of both. A new kind of society might be built on forms of non-alienated work that sustains and enhances life in all its forms, thus beginning from claiming new possibilities and new identities for workers with the aim of subverting the second contradiction of capitalism. The aim is to end unsustainable and ecologically destructive work and embrace new forms of social metabolism.

It is here that the second substantial factor can enter the debate, as disturbing as it may be, whereby the socialist experiment in Eastern Europe, China, and other contexts, left a legacy of environmental destruction and injustice. The reasons for this failure lay in the fact that 'existing socialism' has been mostly based on forced industrialisation, internal and external colonisation and high-modernist environmental schemes and technologies competing in 'creative destruction', with those employed in capitalist regimes.

Therefore, it is not enough to replace capitalism and reduce social inequalities, because there is a need

to abolish masculinist economic models, productivism, extractivism, GDP growth, war, racism, imperialism, colonialism and all that produces violence against people and their environments. The next step would be to replace them with a completely new system of production and reproduction, one based not only on equality but on respect for life in all its forms. There is no other way to make an ecological revolution, no shortcut through the current system.

In order to build a new system, historical materialism states, there is a need for an organised and conscious working-class, to take the lead. But the point I want to make here is that, for the working class to become the political subject of a new system of ecological relationships, a new consciousness must come about: an ecological class-consciousness, based on a renewed, multiple process of subjectivation, capable of turning the working-class into the leading historical subject for an emancipatory, and non-oppressive, green revolution. In order to become the subject of this ecological revolution to come, labour organisations should profoundly transform themselves in a way that puts ecology center stage in their political visions and strategies. The question remains whether this shift in labour politics is possible in today's world.

But it is not only the labour movements that need transformation, and

“Si la clase trabajadora se va a convertir en sujeto político para un nuevo sistema, necesita una nueva conciencia: una conciencia de clase ecológica basada en un proceso de subjetivación renovado y diverso que sea capaz de convertir la clase trabajadora en el sujeto histórico de una revolución verde emancipadora y no opresora”

“La lucha para hacer frente al cambio climático es un reto enorme, y el movimiento de trabajadores y trabajadoras debería estar en primera línea de esa lucha, porque de hecho, ya están en la primera línea de la lucha contra el cambio climático que impulsa el capitalismo”

in fact labour does not and cannot transform itself in a social vacuum. A larger, emancipatory process of cultural change is needed that allows new solidarities and alliances to form in order to re-claim the forgotten subject of labor outside domination/exploitation. Something of the kind that the movie *Pride* recalls: a story in which gay and lesbian activists from London link their struggle for recognition to that of the coal miners of South Wales. The story highlights the effectiveness of bypassing many cultural and communication barriers and prejudices, thus demonstrating that new kinds of politics are always possible to build, especially when people and organisations are not stuck in the infinite reiteration of 'identity'. Further, the film exemplifies transformative politics that challenge identities, and carries a stronger capacity for liberation and revolution.

After decades of neoliberal politics, which have nearly defeated labour on all possible fronts, there is a need to enhance workers' potential for self-transformation into new kinds of organisations with new kinds of visions and strategies. Since we cannot build a revolution without some kind of organisation and strategy, then we should strive to forge the ones that are best suited for the fight.

Fighting climate change is a challenge where the labour movements should be on the front line because workers

are already at the front line on the war of capitalism against climate change. In addition to labour movements, Indigenous Peoples, small farming communities, the unemployed, and women of all groups are at the forefront of this front line. Therefore, in organising to defend themselves, they defend all humanity from ecological ruin. Such kind of struggle requires, evidently, a profound transformation of labour's traditional visions and mottos and of those from the Left in general. In the past two decades, activist research in Information and Communication Technology and social networking has played a crucial role in transforming ways and possibilities of organising, through the Peer 2 Peer movement² and Social Network Unionism³ in general. These resources do not create a direct bargaining power, but enhance strategic visions and campaigning power; virtual unionism cannot replace local or national unionism, but can help it in self-transformation and building strength.

New forms of labour organising and networking in research/activism also include open-access publications, such as *Interface. A Journal for and about Social Movements*⁴ or the magazine *Roar. Reflections on a Revolution*⁵. These new instruments have been helping to transform labour movements in the direction of a larger incorporation of ecological issues, and especially to forging new alliances. Further, they have been crucial in

creating the preconditions for a convergence between climate and labour politics - some examples include: the Blue-Green Alliance⁶ and the One Million Climate Jobs Campaign⁷. These new coalitions have been producing visible results, testified by the massive presence of trade-union organisations at the People's Climate March in NYC, for example, and by the incorporation of climate change issues within the agenda of the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) and of the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Naturally, this is a complex, non-linear process of internal transformation, made up of different and sometimes contrasting components, which often encounters resistance from within. This is where political ecology research could enter the labour movement, as a perspective and an approach to understanding conflicts and struggles originated by ecological contradictions. Notably, these contradictions often enter the labour movement and divide it along various lines including: the local/national/global divide, the gender divide, the North/South divide, the specialised/unskilled labour divide, the urban/rural divide, along with several types of ideological and identity divides.

Fighting climate change thus means different things to different trade unions. For the ITUC (International Trade Unions Confederation) it has

meant adopting a 'green jobs' strategy based on an Environmental Economics approach and advocating green growth. For anti-systemic unions such as the Spanish *Solidaridad Obrera*, for example, it means a much more radical 'green revolution' agenda, based on the reduction of working time, re-commoning of public services, reduction of unnecessary material and energy consumption, re-localisation of production, democratic control of the economy, decentralised energy systems, and the union's participation in anti-fracking and similar mobilisations at the grassroots local level (Ojanguren Flores et al 2014). The middle ground is occupied by a large number of organizations that have not yet elaborated an autonomous position on climate change, as is the case of the WFTU. The only explicit mention to ecology that can be found in its 2013 report, comes from the deliberations of its 2nd Pan-African affiliates meeting, which committed its members 'to campaign actively against catastrophic ecological practices of the multinationals and monopolies'. Given the central role played by mineral extrac-

tion in determining climate change with its profoundly unequal repercussions, this is an excellent starting point from where to build a union's platform of struggle for a global 'just sustainability'. Being a class-oriented, independent organization, WFTU has the potentiality to develop a radical critique of 'green capitalism' and an advanced form of working-class environmentalism that would position it at the forefront of climate justice struggles. Coming out of the multiple crises that afflict the world today, the economic/occupational as well as the ecological, requires no lesser effort than that of completely let go of the 'treadmill of production' – that is the ideology and politics of unlimited GDP growth. It requires an ecological revolution – as theorized by Carolyn Merchant: a complete shift in the social organization of production, reproduction, and consciousness. Another way of working and living, of producing and distributing wealth, rooted in a disalienated work, in the respect for life and in commonality, must be the political platform on which to build the new alliance.

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¹This is a reduced version of a chapter entitled 'Labour and climate change. Towards an emancipatory ecological class-consciousness', published in Temper L., and Gilbertson T., (eds). *Refocusing resistance to climate justice: COPing in, COPing out and beyond Paris*, EJOLT report no. 23, 2015.

² See http://p2pfoundation.net/Main_Page

³ See <https://snuproject.wordpress.com/about/>

⁴ See <http://www.interfacejournal.net/>

⁵ See <http://roarmag.org/>

⁶ See <http://www.bluegreenalliance.org/splash>

⁷ See <http://www.campaigncc.org/greenjobs> for the UK and <http://climatejobs.org.za/about/> for South Africa.