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**PAPER ON THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION:**

**“CAPITALISM OR THE PLANET”**

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# **INTRODUCTION**

“Capitalism,” says Wolfgang Streeck in his provocatively titled collection of essays *How will capitalism end?[[1]](#footnote-1)* “has always been an improbable social formation, full of conflicts and contradictions, therefore permanently unstable and in flux.” (Kindle location 105).

He goes on to argue that there are three critical, mutually-reinforcing factors that spell the impending doom of the system. These include:

* Declining growth
* Growing inequality
* Rising debt – private and public.

Importantly, he does not see a “replacement-system” (such as socialism) waiting in the wings, as it were, to neatly and smoothly take over. Instead, he says

What is to be expected on the basis of capitalism’s recent historical record, is a long and painful period of cumulative decay: of intensifying frictions, of fragility and uncertainty, and of a steady succession of “normal accidents” – not necessarily but quite possibly on the scale of the global breakdown of the 1930s.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Kindle location 1307 – 1309)

But if capitalism is to linger around indefinitely – even as a wounded dog – this means we will continue to suffer its effects.

With the prospect of nothing less than ecological catastrophe looming large in the foreseeable future, it is difficult to understate the challenge facing all of humanity going forward.

The best scientific knowledge available shows that catastrophic climate change can be avoided only if greenhouse gas emissions are reduced quickly and drastically, but that can only be done by *breaking the wealth and power of the world’s most powerful corporations*.[[3]](#footnote-3) [our emphasis]. According to a web article by Frank Jacobs (6 May 2019), just 100 companies produce 71 percent of the world's greenhouse gases.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Clearly, the historical task of the Left is to kick capitalism while it’s down; to hasten its demise; to usher in the brave new post-capitalist world-order. The compelling slogan that has to drive our movement is

CAPITALISM OR THE PLANET

# **STAGNATION – CAPITALISM’S DEFAULT POSITION**

“Stagnation” is a condition of slow or even negative growth in the economy, accompanied by high unemployment/ underemployment, and excess productive capacity. It is a condition that has *always* afflicted the world capitalist system – identified by Marx and Engels as early as the late nineteenth century. The mature capitalist economies experienced a brief respite following WWII – the so-called Golden Age period of unprecedented growth and prosperity enjoyed by capitalism – which lasted to around the end of the 1960s.

According to John Bellamy Foster, the problem concerning stagnation is that the enormous productivity of the monopoly-capitalist economy, coupled with oligopolistic pricing, generates a huge and growing surplus, which goes beyond the capacity of the economy to absorb through the normal channels of consumption and investment.

* + Effective demand remains insufficient even when civilian government spending is added in.
  + The system therefore becomes dependent on the generation of larger and larger amounts of waste in the form of military spending, the expansion of the sales effort, speculative finance, etc., which function as external stimulants boosting production. All of these stimulants, however, are bound to prove inadequate to support the economy over time, since bigger and bigger injections are needed just to keep it going. (page 15)[[5]](#footnote-5)

In a nutshell, the problem faced by monopoly capital is its enormous capacity to *overproduce*. Thus, demand (even with government intervention) is unable on a long-term basis to absorb the system’s excess production. What this means is that there is a propensity for the system to generate surpluses (profits) that cannot readily or easily be reinvested. Thus, there arises within the system an inherent compulsion to create (re)investment opportunities – without which the system will regress to its normal state – stagnation.

Foster identifies and discusses the various stratagems (or “mechanisms” or “counter-tendencies” as he calls them) that have served either to counterbalance or represent attempts to overcome mature capitalism’s tendency toward stagnation. Whereas

The tendency to stagnation is inherent in the system, deeply rooted and in continuous operation, the counter-tendencies, on the other hand, are varied, intermittent, and (most important), self-limiting.” (page 41)[[6]](#footnote-6). These include

* Imperialism and globalisation
* Key inventions and technologies
* Growth of government spending
* Financial speculation

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to discuss any of these mechanisms in much detail, but some key points are briefly touched on.

## **Imperialism and globalisation**

* Imperialist expansion has been an ongoing life-line for the mature capitalist economies, particularly the colonial phase of the late nineteenth-mid-twentieth century. National independence did little to halt the pattern of exploitation, with ex-colonies in most instances continuing to function as adjuncts to their “mother” economies.
* China and Russia have joined the current-day scramble for Africa, which is increasingly being seen by the capitalist super-powers as the next big growth opportunity (in their struggle against stagnation).
* However, as Foster observes: for a variety of reasons, such as the worldwide competition for markets, global stagnation (evident in the growth of worldwide excess capacity) and the soaring surplus obtained from exploitation of third world markets, which adds to the capital looking for outlets, such external expansion has not seriously alleviated the tendency toward an over-accumulation of capital on either a U.S. or world scale. (pages 41 – 42)

## **Key inventions and technologies**

* The Internet and the so-called 4IR are expected to play a similar role in the twenty-first-century to that played by technologies like the automobile in the twentieth-century.
* The automobile industry has served capitalism well. Its invention led to huge developments that transformed global economies. Apart from the mass ownership of automobiles, there was the building of an extensive system of roads, bridges, and tunnels; the need for a network of gas stations, restaurants, automotive parts and repair shops; the efficient and inexpensive movement of goods from any location to any other location. . . (Foster, page 42)
* However, one of the major down-sides of the automobile revolution is CO2 pollution which is literally threatening our survival on this planet,
* The Internet, too, comes with mixed blessings. It is a huge factor in accelerating (maybe irreversible) unemployment levels on a global scale.

## **Growth of government spending**

* Many people are convinced that the US economy would have collapsed long ago if that country were not engaged in perpetual warfare.
* Militarism for the vested interests is that it stimulates and supports investment in capital goods as well as research and development of products to create new industries.… Military orders made a significant and sometimes decisive difference in the shipbuilding, machine tools and other machinery industries, communication equipment, and much more … As late as 1985, the military bought 66 percent of aircraft manufactures, 93 percent of shipbuilding, and 50 percent of communication equipment in the United States. (Foster: page 43)
* The grim reality is that capitalism – for its very survival – is dependent on warfare. To survive it must kill. . .

## **Speculation**

* Particularly since the 1970s, the lack of investment opportunities in the “real” economy has led the owners of capital increasingly to search for profitable returns by investing their surpluses in the speculative avenues, such as the stock exchange.
* On the supply side of this process, financial institutions stepped forward with a vast array of new financial instruments: futures, options, derivatives, hedge funds, etc. The result was skyrocketing financial speculation that has persisted now for decades. (Foster, pages 79 – 80)

## **Impacts**

John Bellamy Foster summarises the stark reality facing us:

Less than two decades into the twenty-first century, it is evident that capitalism has failed as a social system. The world is mired in economic stagnation, financialization, and the most extreme inequality in human history, accompanied by mass unemployment and underemployment, precariousness, poverty, hunger, wasted output and lives, and what at this point can only be called a planetary ecological “death spiral.”The digital revolution, the greatest technological advance of our time, has rapidly mutated from a promise of free communication and liberated production into new means of surveillance, control, and displacement of the working population. The institutions of liberal democracy are at the point of collapse, while fascism, the rear guard of the capitalist system, is again on the march, along with patriarchy, racism, imperialism, and war.

To say that capitalism is a failed system is not, of course, to suggest that its breakdown and disintegration is imminent. It does, however, mean that it has passed from being a historically necessary and creative system at its inception to being a historically unnecessary and destructive one in the present century. Today, more than ever, the world is faced with the epochal choice between “the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large and the common ruin of the contending classes.[[7]](#footnote-7)

With no lasting cure for the problem of stagnation under capitalism, and with climate-related disaster already “at the city gates” so to speak, the coming decades are likely to see class struggle intensify to the point where either capitalism succumbs, or humanity – and the planet – succumbs.

# **THE PROBLEM**

In this section we will argue that the sustainability crisis is not some future scenario that society needs to forestall but a global catastrophe that is already upon us.

According to a statement by the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency (RCIT) on 20 September 2019:

The youth based initiative *Fridays for Future* (FFF) called for a week-long “Earth Strike”, beginning 20th September 2019. This is a very important and highly necessary campaign which has rightly received the support of millions of workers, poor peasants and youth around the world. The *Revolutionary Communist International Tendency* (RCIT) strongly welcomes and supports this initiative!

*The Global Week for Future* is supported by various forces including NGOs and even some trade unions. The goal of FFF is to convince the capitalists respectively the imperialist governments all around the world to implement environmental protection measures, which can assure that the goals of the *Paris Agreement* will be met. However, even the full implementation of the *Paris Agreement* would not stop the ongoing climate change but just postpone the turning point towards an entirely new climate that the planet is currently heading towards.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Borge Brende, President of the World Economic Forum (WEF) states:

. . . This is a globalized world, as a result of which historic reductions in global poverty have been achieved. ***(REALLY?) our italics.*** But it is also increasingly clear that change is needed.

Polarization is on the rise in many countries.In some cases, the social contracts that hold societies together are fraying. This is an era of unparalleled resources and technological advancement, but for too many people it is also an era of insecurity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

WE ASK WHY?

## **What is the role of the WEF?**

The WEF was established in 1971 as a not-for-profit foundation**.** Itis the international organization for Public-Private co-operation. It engages the foremost political, business and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas. [[10]](#footnote-10)

## What has happened under their watch?

In the long list of studies done on the effects of global warming, the risks to world agriculture stood out as among the most important as shown in a study by William Cline in 2007. [[11]](#footnote-11)

It was widely recognized at the time that developing countries in general stood to lose much more from the effects of global warming on agriculture than the industrial countries.

Fast-forward to 2015 when the *State of the Climate* report[[12]](#footnote-12) was released in early August by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It paints a frightening picture of a rapidly warming world. This report draws on the work of 450 scientists from 62 countries, and shows that the effects of climate change are already hitting hard.

2015 was confirmed as the warmest year on record, beating the previous high, set in 2014, by 0.13 degrees Celsius – the biggest year-on-year jump in the record since 1998. This is part of a definite trend, with *15 out of the 17 warmest years coming since 2000.*

Over the past 200 years the world has warmed by 1 degree. If current trends continue, it will warm by another 1 degree in less than a decade![[13]](#footnote-13)

A report published in 2015 by the World Bank (*Shockwaves: Managing the Impact of Climate Change on Poverty)[[14]](#footnote-14)*highlighted the threat posed by climate change to the world's poorest communities. According to the report,

(C)limate change could force more than 100 million people into extreme poverty by 2030.

Extreme poverty was defined as living on less than $1.25 a day! At that time there were 1 billion people in this category, specifically living in the “developing economies.” It was estimated, according to modelling referred to in the report, that global crop yields could decline by as much as 5 percent by 2030 and 30 percent by 2080. Declining yields have the potential to cause the kind of rapid increases in food prices that, in 2008, drove around 100 million people into poverty.

Another study cited in the report found, “(I)n parts of Africa and Asia, climate-related price adjustments could increase poverty rates for non-agricultural households by 20-50 percent”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**NOTE: *A recent ENCA news report (10 Oct 2019) stated that South African farmers are concerned at declining yields.***

It was also noted in this World Bank report that the impact of climate change on ecosystems could be “catastrophic.” It was cited, for example, that small island states or low-lying coastal areas could be rendered “completely uninhabitable” in the longer term. The increasing frequency of extreme weather and natural disasters such as droughts, floods and fires is another area of concern. The report points out that under a high-emissions scenario, the heat wave in Europe in 2003, which killed more than 70,000 people, will be an *average* by the end of the century![[16]](#footnote-16)

## **The final area examined in the report is health**.

Diseases that disproportionately affect poorer communities, such as malaria and diarrhoea, are expected to increase in a warming world. According to the report “(W)arming of 2 or 3 degrees C could increase the number of people at risk for malaria by up to 5 percent, or more than 150 million people. Deaths from pollution are also expected to increase. The report cites a study showing that “climate change could cause annually an additional 100,000 premature deaths associated with exposure to small particle matter and 6,300 premature deaths associated with ozone exposure”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Climate activist, Naomi Klein’s recent book, *On Fire: The (burning) case for a Green New Deal*,[[18]](#footnote-18) looks at why capitalism and politics have got in the way of addressing the climate crisis. In an interview[[19]](#footnote-19) she stated

We are seeing the beginnings of the era of climate barbarism . . . Wherever in the world they live, this generation has something in common: they are the first for whom climate disruption on a planetary scale is not a future threat, but a lived reality.

# **CHINA AS CHIMNEY OF THE WORLD**

Today, the Chinese economy is the second largest in the world, and, with an average growth rate of 9.52 percent between 1989 and 2019, is on the verge of overtaking America as the largest. [[20]](#footnote-20)

China is also the world’s top emitter of CO2. Between 2000 and 2006, 55% of total global growth of CO2 emissions happened in China; by 2007, its share had risen to two thirds. In 2006, two decades earlier than forecast, China eclipsed the United States as the world’s top emitter.[[21]](#footnote-21) In 2017, China was responsible for 27.21 percent of worldwide CO2 fossil fuel emissions, and America (in second place behind China), for 14.58 percent.

The basic reason why China has become the “chimney of the world” is not hard to find.

Globally mobile capital will relocate factories to situations where labor power is cheap and disciplined—where the rate of surplus-value promises to be largest—*by means of new rounds of massive consumption of fossil energy*.[[22]](#footnote-22) (our emphasis)

American factories have been relocating to China in their droves – a trend which Donald Trump wishes to reverse. (This could be behind his decision to pull America out of the Paris Agreement. If manufacturing industry and export of manufactured goods – both based on increased fossil fuels emission, at least in the short run – are likely to increase, then his reluctance to commit to the Paris Agreement makes sense.)

“Making America Great Again!” means fostering the illusion among rank-and-file Americans that factories on home soil will revive the American Dream. American capitalists will have the last say. Their drive for profit-maximization will determine where they choose to produce. If American tariffs are sufficiently punitive and sustained over the long-run, they will relocate from China to America.

## **Is China worsening the developing world's environmental crisis?**

The developing world is in the midst of an environmental crisis. Simply breathing the air is a leading cause of death.

In her interview, Klein states that one recent study found that pollution is to blame for a fifth of sub-Saharan Africa's infant deaths. Another showed that exposure to toxins or other dangerous substances in the air killed over 9 million people in 2015 alone, with 92% of those deaths occurring in developing countries – this is more people than were killed by AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined in that same year. In Latin America, over one-third of deaths from lung cancer, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease were estimated to stem from air pollution in 2012.[[23]](#footnote-23)

There are many reasons behind these troubling trends, but one looms especially large: China's booming economy.

Not only has this created an environmental crisis in China itself, but the nature of its trade with developing nations threaten *their* air, water and soil as well, according to Klein.

Over the last decade, China has become the biggest trade partner to continental Africa and to several countries in Latin America – homes to some of the world's poorest people. At the same time, air pollution has surged in many of these countries, especially in Africa.

Are these two trends linked?

## **The environmental cost of trade.**

Most economists agree (says Klein)[[24]](#footnote-24) that trade does generate economic growth and development.

Unfortunately, these benefits often come with costs, such as environmental degradation. Developing countries are especially susceptible to this side effect because they often export pollution-intensive goods like fossil fuels and metals and have weak environmental regulations. Western governments have increasingly been pushing developing countries to protect their environments via trade agreements.

NAFTA, for example, was the first U.S. Trade agreement to include legally binding environmental conditions – something that is now a standard element. A similar trend occurred in Europe, where binding environmental provisions became fixtures in trade agreements around 2006. In contrast, China does not push its partners to strengthen environmental protections. For this reason, trading intensively with China is especially likely to generate high levels of pollution in developing countries.[[25]](#footnote-25)

## **Links between China’s trade and pollution**.

Against this backdrop, Klein investigated whether trade with China affected sulphur dioxide emissions and environmental illnesses in 58 Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries from 2001 to 2010.

To capture how intensively these countries traded with China, she measured sample countries’ trade volumes in U.S. dollars as a share of their gross domestic product. She then conducted statistical tests to determine whether this measure of trade correlates to two relevant indicators of pollution: sulphur dioxide emissions and a measure of environmental public health developed by researchers at Yale. She also controlled for a series of other variables to isolate the relationship between trade and pollution.

Her findings show that pollution levels of many developing countries rose in tandem with trade to China – but not all of them.

Interestingly, the environmental impact of trading with China appears to depend on characteristics of countries’ governments. Those countries with high quality of governance, as measured by researchers at the Quality of Government Institute did not experience heightened air pollution or environmental illness when they traded at high levels with China.

In countries with strong governance, such as Chile, Gambia and Tanzania, which scored near the top of her sample, trading with China had little impact on sulphur dioxide emissions and environmental public health.

On the other hand, trading intensively with China worsened the air quality in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Paraguay, which all ranked among the worst in governance.

## **How to fix this?**

One is by finding ways to improve governance in the developing world. Governance quality encompasses bureaucracy, law and order and transparency. Countries with stronger bureaucracies can manage a multipronged policy agenda that promotes trade while protecting the environment. Governments capable of ensuring law and order are able to enforce environmental rules and regulations. Transparent institutions reduce opportunities for corruption that undermine efforts to protect the environment, such as bribery of public officials.

Collectively, these features of good governance protect countries’ environments and offset negative impacts that would otherwise be generated by trading intensively with China.

At the same time, China could change its ways and do more to push for stronger environmental laws abroad. Western countries tend to do this already because of lobbying efforts by both environmentalists and producers that compete with Mexican firms, who fear being at a competitive disadvantage if developing countries have weak environmental laws.

As wages continue to grow in China, the Chinese government will face similar pressures from domestic producers to do the same. It is perhaps telling that China recently signalled its interest in global environmental leadership.

Until there’s a change, however, China’s growth will continue dirtying the air in many of the countries that trade with it most, and their environmental crisis will worsen.

# **REVOLUTION AS A CONSEQUENCE OF GLOBAL WARMING**

The threats facing the current capitalist world order are set to multiply under the impact of global warming. Rising temperatures are expected to translate into rising social turbulence.[[26]](#footnote-26) Pre-existing conditions of conflict – *embedded in social relations* across many centuries – will be exacerbated. In other words, worsening living conditions – the continuing immiseration of the majority of the Earth’s people – will be the basic trigger expected to provoke widespread, ongoing revolutionary struggles throughout the course of the twenty-first century.

Social ecologist Andreas Malm, reminds us of Marx’s theory of climate-induced social confrontation:

‘The specific economic form,’ Marx writes in the third volume of Capital, ‘in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude.’ Now [says Malm] if the direct producers experience a climatic shock that reduces their capacity to reproduce themselves, and if the [economic] pump continues to operate or even accelerates, sending ever more resources towards the top, chances are that the former will rise up. If they cannot command the clouds to open, at least they can break the pump that takes away what little they have left. These are the relations of domination and servitude through which the impact of climate change is fundamentally articulated.[[27]](#footnote-27)

But while the masses will rise in defense of their basic survival needs, it can be expected that the elites will rise in defense of their privileges.

The prognosis, therefore, is one of intensifying class struggle.

# **COUNTER-REVOLUTION AS A CONSEQUENCE OF GLOBAL WARMING**

Even in the absence of revolutionary mass uprisings, it is not inconceivable that fascist tendencies will grow. Thus, if we are currently witnessing an upsurge of crude racism, xenophobia and fundamentalism, this is set to worsen in a world where climate-change is destroying the basis of life on the planet. As we have seen, desperation can drive anti-social behaviour. As Lenin noted in 1917 of the “broad masses” who were so easily seduced by the anti-Semitic propaganda of the Black Hundreds:

Can one imagine a capitalist society on the eve of collapse in which the oppressed masses are not desperate? Is there any doubt that the desperation of the masses, a large part of whom are still ignorant, will express itself in the increased consumption of all sorts of poison? [[28]](#footnote-28) (in this case, Anti-Semitism).

This is what we are witnessing under the Trump regime in America, in the “hard-Brexit” campaign in the UK, and in the Xenophobic hysteria prevalent the South African nation-state.

# **CAN CAPITALISM SAVE THE PLANET?**

In their book, Climate Leviathan[[29]](#footnote-29), Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright discuss hypothetical possibilities for effective climate mitigation in a world capitalist order that is subject to the general disciplines of what they call a *planetary sovereign*.

The purpose of such planetary sovereign would be to play a global leadership role in efforts to reduce or prevent emission of greenhouse gases.

The planetary sovereign is a regulatory authority armed with democratic legitimacy, technical authority on scientific issues, and a . . . capacity to monitor . . . elements of our emerging world: fresh water, carbon emissions, climate refugees, and so on. [[30]](#footnote-30)

In this scenario:

. . . capitalism is treated not as a question, but as the solution to climate change. Climate change appears as an opportunity: trade in emissions permits, “green” business, nuclear power, corporate leadership, carbon capture and storage, green finance, and ultimately, geo-engineering.[[31]](#footnote-31)

But the authors cannot see such a body taking the far-reaching action (for example, like ensuring that fossil fuels are “kept in the ground”) which is necessary to reverse climate change.

For someone like Andreas Malm, nothing short of the revolutionary disruption of the capitalist order is necessary.[[32]](#footnote-32) He quotes Lenin (from “Revolution at the Gates”):

‘The ways of combating catastrophe and famine are available, the measures required to combat them are quite clear, simple, perfectly feasible, and fully within reach of the people’s forces.’

Malm goes on to list ten “quite clear, simple and perfectly feasible” measures:

1. Enforce a complete moratorium on all new facilities for extracting coal, oil or natural gas.

2. Close down all power-plants running on such fuels.

3. Draw 100 percent of electricity from non-fossil sources, primarily wind and solar.

4. Terminate the expansion of air, sea and road travel; convert road and sea travel to electricity and wind; ration remaining air travel to ensure a fair distribution until it can be completely replaced with other means of transport.

5. Expand mass transit systems on all scales, from subways to intercontinental high speed trains.

6. Limit the shipping and flying of food and systematically promote local supplies.

7. End the burning of tropical forests and initiate massive programmes for reforestation.

8. Refurbish old buildings with insulation and require all new ones to generate their own zero-carbon power.

9. Dismantle the meat industry and move human protein requirements towards vegetable sources.

10. Pour public investment into the development and diffusion of the most efficient and sustainable renewable energy technologies, as well as technologies for carbon dioxide removal.

Such an approach, says, Malm would “be a start — nothing more — yet it would probably amount to a revolution, not only in the forces of production but also in the social relations in which they are so deeply enmeshed.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

# **“SOLUTIONS” UNDER CAPITALISM**

Solutions, generally, would fall under two headings – *mitigation* and *adaptation*. Mitigation would involve reducing greenhouse gas emissions, while adaptation would mean finding ways of living or coping on a warmer planet.

## **Mitigation in a capitalist world**

Mitigation can mean using new technologies and renewable energies, making older equipment more energy efficient, or changing management practices or consumer behaviour. It can be as complex as a plan for a new city, or as a simple as improvements to a cook stove design. Efforts underway around the world range from high-tech subway systems to bicycle paths and walkways.

The following are some of the major mitigation options being explored

* Carbon capture and storage (CCS): This is the process of capturing waste carbon dioxide (usually from large point sources such as a cement factory), transporting it to a storage site, and depositing it where it will not enter the atmosphere.[[34]](#footnote-34)
* Emissions trading: This is a market-based approach to controlling pollution by providing economic incentives for achieving reductions in the emissions of pollutants. A central authority (usually a governmental body) allocates or sells a limited number of permits to discharge specific quantities of a specific pollutant per time period. Polluters are required to hold permits in amount equal to their emissions. Polluters that want to increase their emissions must buy permits from others willing to sell them.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Cap and trade (CAT) programs are a type of flexible environmental regulation that allows organizations and markets to decide how best to meet policy targets.

At COP21 (Conference of the Parties’ 21st meeting) in Paris in 2015, 195 countries committed to drastically reducing their carbon emissions levels. The accepted target adopted was to keep the overall global temperature increase to 1.5 or 2 degrees C relative to pre-industrial levels.

Right now, we are at 1.1°C, and rising rapidly. According to an authoritative report[[36]](#footnote-36)

* Average global temperature for 2015-2019 is on track to be the warmest of any equivalent period on record. It is currently estimated to be 1.1°C above pre-industrial (1850-1900) times and 0.2°C warmer than 2011-2015;
* Observations show that the global mean sea level rise is accelerating and that there is an overall increase of 26% in ocean acidity since the beginning of the industrial era;
* Global emissions are not estimated to peak by 2030, let alone by 2020;
* Implementing current unconditional Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) would lead to a global mean temperature rise between 2.9°C and 3.4°C by 2100 relative to pre-industrial levels, and continuing thereafter;
* The current level of NDC ambition needs to be roughly tripled for emission reduction to be in line with the 2°C goal, and increased fivefold for the 1.5°C goal. Technically it is still possible to bridge the gap.
  + “Technically,” maybe. But, politically?

Not surprisingly, Oxfam[[37]](#footnote-37) found that

The poorest half of the global population are responsible for only around 10% of global emissions yet live overwhelmingly in the countries which are most vulnerable to climate change – while the richest 10% of people in the world are responsible for around 50% of global emissions.

According to the World Resources Institute: [[38]](#footnote-38)

* The top three greenhouse gas emitters – China, the European Union and the United States – contribute more than half of total global emissions, while the bottom 100 countries only account for 3.5 percent.
* Collectively, the top 10 emitters account for nearly three-quarters of global emissions.

“The world can’t successfully tackle the climate change challenge without significant action from these countries,” the Institute remarks.

Yet, in 2017 Donald-the-Chump Trump announced his intention to pull America – one of the top three culprits – out of the Paris Agreement.

## **Adaptation in a capitalist world**

Any serious attempt at adaptation would presuppose

. . . trillions of dollars of investment in the urban and rural infrastructures of poor and medium income countries, as well as the assisted migration of tens of millions of people from Africa and Asia. . .[[39]](#footnote-39)

The track record of the capitalist rulers-of-the-Universe leads us to believe that their first priority would be to defend the existing social relations and to defend their privileges, even if it means abandoning the planet. Thus, adaptation for the rich-and-famous would include:

* The creation of green and gated oases of permanent affluence on an otherwise stricken planet.[[40]](#footnote-40)
* Increased use of air conditioning. However, it should be remembered that air conditioning does not *reduce* heating, it simply *moves* it elsewhere. Moreover, air conditioning is power-hungry, it feeds off electricity, which is generated from the burning of fossil fuels![[41]](#footnote-41)
* Geo-engineering solutions, such as “solar radiation management” (SRM) to artificially increase Earth’s ability to reflect sunlight back into space. These would include schemes to pump sulfate aerosols into the atmosphere to reflect sunlight back into space, and putting iron in the oceans to increase carbon absorption by marine organisms. Another geo-engineering “solution would include putting vast arrays of mirrors in the sky or on the ground to reflect back sunlight.[[42]](#footnote-42)
  + An instance of such elitist manipulation of the climate is “the manner in which Beijing’s air quality was re-engineered during the 2008 Olympics – flowers potted all over the city, traffic barred, trees planted in the desert, and factories and power plants closed – all to successfully blue the skies for the Games.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

But, as Oxfam reminds us (see section above entitled “Mitigation in a capitalist world”), climate change has largely been caused by the affluent. We should therefore expand the range of solutions beyond merely technical options, and *politicize* the issue. This way the question of *compensation* will come into play. As Mann and Wainwright put it

Developed countries, which are responsible for the bulk of the historical emissions of greenhouse gases, have sought to restrict adaptation discussions because it then inevitably leads to the question of historic responsibility and who should pay for adaptation.[[44]](#footnote-44)

## **Suffering as a consequence**

Acute shortages of food and water are poised to become some of the most tangible effects of global warming. In the run-up to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, rising food prices partly caused by extreme weather intensified the latent tensions, and the Middle East — so far the revolutionary cauldron of the century — can expect more to come. No region is as prone to water scarcity, and none as vulnerable to ‘tele-connected food supply shocks,’ or harvest failures in distant breadbaskets driving up prices of the imports on which the population depends.[[45]](#footnote-45)

## **The limits of capitalism as a solution**

Something about which we must be emphatically clear: capitalism is the problem, not the solution.

While it is obviously true that a huge part of our struggle will entail forcing the capitalists to retreat from their profit-making bastions in planet-destroying fossil fuels, there can be no sustainable solution to the climate crisis without the ultimate defeat of the capitalist system.

Capitalism is about profitability – whether this is achieved via income growth or cost saving. Usually it is achieved by maximizing both within the framework of the capitalist corporation’s investment strategy.

The use of fossil fuels to drive the motor of capitalist enterprise has been embedded in the system since the dawn of industrialisation. This is supported by research which shows that preference for coal- over hydro-power in the mid-nineteenth-century (even though the latter was cheaper AND more energy-efficient) was because it made controlling the workforce much easier.[[46]](#footnote-46)

In a more fundamental sense, capitalism treats nature (and with it, fossil fuels) as a commodity, as something that is limitless, as something to be bought and sold on the (free) market – something that is subject to the dictates of supply and demand, when in fact, nature IS limited, and therefore cannot be treated as a commodity.

# **GREEN CAPITALISM**

“Green capitalism” is the latest trick-in-the-book being proposed as the means for saving the planet (as well as the capitalist system).

In a nutshell, proponents of green capitalism try to promote the thinking that managing the environment can succeed through the market mechanism. Some of their reasoning is as follows:

* Since the market responds to signals of supply and demand, the fast-waning supply of clean air will be reflected in higher market prices, and market participants will react accordingly. In other words, (in the long run) rising prices will constrain abuse of the environment.
* By the same token, if (in the short term) we experience unacceptable rises in the amount of greenhouse gas emissions and in the rate of planetary degradation, then capitalism will respond via reduced growth, and reduced growth in turn will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and with it, the rate of planetary degradation!
* Capitalism responds to incentives. What greater incentive is there than to find and create the technologies that will assure our tomorrow? A favourite mantra of capitalist-apologists is that capitalism is innovative – capitalism will innovate us out of this problem!

But in a succinctly-written article, Victor Wallis easily demolishes the case for green capitalism.[[47]](#footnote-47) He reminds us that Marx situated capitalism’s crisis-tendencies not only in the business cycle but in

* The increased concentration of economic power that inevitably occurred under capitalism;
* Increased polarization between rich and poor, both within and across national boundaries;
* A permanent readiness for military engagement in support of these drives, and
* The uninterrupted debasement or depletion of the planet’s vital natural resources.

At a conceptual level, says Wallis:

. . . it is clear that “green capitalism” seeks to bind together two antagonistic notions. To be green means to prioritize the health of the ecosphere, with all that this entails in terms of curbing greenhouse gases and preserving biodiversity. To promote capitalism, by contrast, is to foster growth and accumulation, treating both the workforce and the natural environment as mere inputs.[[48]](#footnote-48)

On the question of technology being a silver bullet, Wallis has the following to say:

The unending proliferation of innovations – a hallmark of late capitalism[[49]](#footnote-49) – lends credence, in public perception, to the idea that there is no challenge that technology cannot overcome. The unstated premise behind such claims is that the selection of any technology will continue to reflect corporate interests, which in turn reflect the goals implicit in market competition, i.e., profit-maximization, growth, and accumulation. While green technologies – e.g., renewable energy sources – may attract a degree of corporate attention (thanks mainly to social/political pressure), nothing short of a change in the basic locus of economic decision-making will stop certain corporations from continuing to pursue established [non-green] lines of production. Insofar as they must nonetheless try to present themselves in green clothing, they will not hesitate to misrepresent the questions at stake and to invoke technological “solutions” that have little chance of being successfully implemented.

## **So, what is the alternative?**

The struggle for a green planet is inseparable from the struggle for a just world. But we know and accept that, as Mike Davis points out, several additional Earths would be required to allow all of humanity to live in a suburban house with two cars and a lawn.[[50]](#footnote-50) In conceptualizing a post-capitalist world in which the relations of production are non-exploitative, the well-being of all must be assured, but NOT at the expense of the environment.

The emphasis must be made to shift from private consumption as the driver of development to what Davis calls “public affluence”

Which is represented by great urban parks, free museums, libraries, and infinite possibilities for human interaction,

And which represents an alternative route to a rich standard of life based on Earth-friendly sociality. . . university campuses are often little quasi-socialist paradises around rich public spaces for learning, research, performance and human reproduction.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Our Ten Point Programme provides an overarching framework within which our approach to a new ecological vision is encapsulated:

Point 7.6: A planned economy must have a balanced approach to the preservation of the environment and to the utilization of all land and its resources: water, rivers, dams, lakes, fishing resources, game farming, tourism, etc., in all their ecological aspects so as to enhance the whole South African environment as a habitat for its people and its fauna and flora. Thus, energy generation through the use of fossil fuels and nuclear power must be phased out and replaced by renewable power sources.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The struggle for climate justice is inseparable from the struggle for social justice. It is a global struggle. The Earth belongs to no-one. As Marx put it

Even an entire society, a nation, or all co-existing societies taken together are not owners of the Earth. They are merely its possessors, its beneficiaries, and . . . are to bequeath it, improved, to succeeding generations.[[53]](#footnote-53)

# **UPSURGE IN THE GLOBAL CLASS STRUGGLE**

In this paper we have isolated the climate crisis for special focus, but this does not mean that it overrides all other areas in the class struggle. It is one of many fronts on which the working people of the world continue to rise up and challenge the hegemony of the ruinous capitalist system which holds us in thrall.

As we write, the following are among the more notable hotspots of anti-capitalist struggle around the world:[[54]](#footnote-54)

* Ecuador: A popular upsurge against the austerity package;
* Chile: A youth-led revolt against drastic subway fare hike and against right-wing President Piñera;
* Haiti: A popular uprising against the neoliberal pro-US regime of Jovenel Moïse;
* Honduras: Mass protests against the reactionary government of President Hernandez;
* Iraq: A revolutionary upsurge against the corrupt government of Adel Abdul-Mahdi;
* Lebanon: A popular upheaval against the government of Prime Minister Hariri and its tax hikes;
* Egypt: A new upsurge of mass protests against the military dictatorship of General Sisi;
* Algeria: ongoing mass protests against the “old guard” of the army which tries to keep power;
* Hong Kong: A popular revolt against the Beijing-imposed regime of Carrie Lam;
* Kashmir: A looming intifada and a general strike against the evocation of autonomy rights by the right-wing Hindu chauvinist government of Narendra Modi;
* Catalunya / Spanish State: A mass upsurge in reaction to the draconic prison sentences against nine leaders of the Catalan independence movement.
* In addition to these, the heroic liberation wars of the Syrian people against the Assad dictatorship (since March 2011) and of the Yemeni people against the Saudi-led invasion (since March 2015) are still continuing despite all setbacks and mass killings.
* Furthermore, there have been a number of significant struggles and political confrontations in other countries which might not have already resulted in pre-revolutionary situations but which are nevertheless significant (e.g. general strike in Columbia, violent clashes in Guinea, teachers strike in Jordan, the *Gilets Jaunes* in France, mass protests against electoral fraud and repression in Russia, confrontations in Bolivia following the coup to oust elected leader, Evo Morales, and mass protests against fuel price hikes in Iran).
* In the case of Sudan, we have seen a degree of stabilization after a democratic-counterrevolutionary compromise and the creation of a bourgeois “transitional government”. However, this situation could change soon.
* (Michael Pröbsting, who compiled this list, does not include Venezuela, which has been the scene of ongoing resistance to Trump’s economic war on the country).

As Gramsci long ago observed, the ruling class makes use of a combination of *consent* and *coercion* in order to secure its hegemony. The above situations will all be examples of where coercion has been the preferred method of quelling resistance and opposition. Up to now, a kind of equilibrium has always been maintained, with no decisive, sustained breakthrough in the global balance of class forces.

The climate crisis offers a real prospect of tipping the scales in favour of revolutionary change.

Our task is clear: We have to indissolubly merge the struggle for climate stabilization with the overall struggle for socialism.

# **WHAT IS TO BE DONE/WHAT MUST WE DO?**

This section is not meant to be exhaustive. Far from it. We see no value in re-hashing as an organization what we have come to regard as self-evident. For example, the work that some of our comrades have been doing under the banner of the JCS is well-known, and need not be discussed here.

Also, at the risk of overlapping with the discussion on the Internal Situation, we raise mainly points concerning “what is to be done” where we find ourselves. These are specific thoughts that we believe it is appropriate for the Movement to be engaging at this time.

## **Strengthen the extra-parliamentary struggle**

We must continue to chip away at and undermine the widespread notion that parliamentary democracy is a mechanism which we on the Left should participate in to effectively address working-class demands.

It is understandable that ordinary people would see parliament as the source of power within society, and that participation would seem to be the way to exercise such power in the interests of the people.

We are aware that members of our own Movement have on occasion been approached to serve at a local council level. This was because such members enjoyed huge credibility and esteem in their communities, and were genuinely seen as leaders who would support and fight to secure the interests of the people.

There is also a tendency from time to time for various leftwing groupings to support conducting the struggle on the parliamentary terrain. Here we are not referring to the opportunists, but to comrades who do believe that parliament should be seen as a forum or arena of struggle through which gains for the working class can be achieved and defended. They often invoke the name of Lenin in support of their strategy. But what they don’t say is that Lenin’s “support for” participation in bourgeois parliaments was not uncritical – it was strategic. A key point from his “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder” is the following:

. . . it has been proved that, far from causing harm to the revolutionary proletariat, participation in a bourgeois-democratic parliament, even a few weeks before the victory of a Soviet republic and even *after* such a victory, actually helps that proletariat to *prove* to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be done away with; it *facilitates* their successful dissolution, and *helps* to make bourgeois parliamentarianism “politically obsolete.[[55]](#footnote-55)

What could be clearer? Timing is everything. *Now* is the time for us to play our part in strengthening the awareness of society to understand that the bourgeois parliament is not there to serve the interests of the working class, but the interests of the elite. We will be dissipating our energies if we entered parliament without being able (as Lenin says) to do away with it.

In place of parliamentary participation, we have to build peoples power (or a people’s democracy) – a self-sustaining movement in which – across the length and breadth of the land – communities organize themselves into democratic grassroots-level organisations, not only as civics, but even in their sports, cultural and religious organisations, so that a culture of democracy AS WELL AS the skill in implementing it, develops and grows.

We have often seen how what starts off as independent people’s struggles get hi-jacked and rendered impotent when they allow themselves to “flirt” (or collaborate) with the rulers. How often hasn’t it happened that workers’ trade unions form an alliance with the bosses, “in the interests of the workers,” and this results in the workers’ “teeth being pulled” – in other words, the workers virtually demobilizing?

So, the way forward is clear: TOWARDS A PEOPLE’S DEMOCRACY.

## **Form alliances with people’s progressive movements**

Specifically, we refer to movements like Abahlali BaseMjondolo (Durban-based Shack Dwellers) and the Xolobeni environmental activists. While we might not agree with everything about them, it is true to say that they come very close to representing in concrete terms what we envisage organisations within a people’s democracy to be.

As we have tried to indicate in this paper, there is expected to be a significant shift in emphasis in the global class struggle going forward. The climate crisis that is unfolding across the entire planet must be politicized. Many of these movements or groupings are in the forefront of struggling either to defend people’s rights (such as Xolobeni in the Eastern Cape) or achieve the legitimate demands of the people (for example, Abahlali in respect of housing) – or both. These are the very communities who will be hardest hit by negative climate impacts, and so it is critical for us to proactively mobilise on a *mass basis*.

## **Foster revolutionary optimism**

This might seem an obvious point, but we should not underestimate how easily demoralization can set in following a defeat.

As an example, we refer here to a local struggle recently, that highlights certain basic lessons in this regard. A number of members of our Movement joined the Uitsig community to attempt to keep their school open. Despite our best efforts – including taking the WCED to court – we lost. Almost the same day, the school building was stripped. In short, hope in the community was replaced by despair – and the looting followed.

As an organization committed to the revolutionary transformation of society, we should learn how “not to be defeated by defeat” but to be able to bounce back and continue, possibly even strengthened.

Uitsig High School was closed. It was one of five schools closed. Originally, twenty-one schools were targeted for closure. That some sixteen schools were *not* closed should be counted as a victory. It suggests perhaps we do have the power to make the WCED and other ruling class organs think twice before they carry out their agendas with impunity.

This brings us to the next point.

## **Use the media in our campaigns**

Over the years, we have been able to get our voices heard, not only via our own internal publications, but through the press and social media channels, as well.

It is a fact that publications here in the Western Cape such as the Cape Argus, Cape Times and Muslim Matters, and in the Eastern Cape, The Herald, welcome our articles, and are prepared to publish them usually without editorial cuts. This is something that we should strive to take better advantage of.

These articles are usually required to be short (between 300 and 500 words) and suffer the disadvantage that often one can’t go into sufficient depth to analyze a particular issue or topic. However, they have the great advantage of being accessible to many more people than we might otherwise have engaged. The challenge is the same that the short story writer faces vis-à-vis the novelist: how to pack sufficient content and meaning (value) into a much shorter format. If we are able to master this – being able to convey a powerful message in a relatively concise way – we will strengthen our ability to communicate our ideas.

There is a not-unjustified argument that ordinary people do not make the link between climate change and their living conditions, and that we should therefore restrict our activism to the daily realities of people’s lives. However, we will need to find creative ways of elucidating these links – of highlighting how, for example, corporations (with the collusion of government) are pumping more and more CO2 into the atmosphere, and how this is leading to the (scientifically-verified) disasters being experienced.

# **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

While the context of the above discussion has been largely if not exclusively restricted to what we should be focusing on here in South Africa, all the points could be extended to include a focus on the broader international context.

In this regard, we already have some experience. For example:

* We have a good relationship with the Namibia Socialist Movement (Marx Read)
* From time to time we made approaches to leftwing writers to share their material in our Bulletins, and have always been greeted with a positive response.

What we are saying is that there is the potential for us to build meaningful alliances with external parties, and in the process, strengthen the global movement for climate activism and socialist change.

This is the direction that we must seriously consider taking as the struggle intensifies.

In this article, we have made quoted John Bellamy Foster extensively. It would be appropriate to end off with a fitting comment from him:

. . . there can be no doubt that change should be directed first and foremost to meeting the basic needs of people for food, housing, employment, health, education, a sustainable environment, etc. Will the government assume the responsibility for providing useful work to all those who desire and need it? Will housing be made available (free from crushing mortgages) to everyone, extending as well to the homeless and the poorly housed? Will a single-payer national health system be introduced to cover the needs of the entire population, replacing the worst and most expensive health care system in the advanced capitalist world? Will military spending be cut back drastically, dispensing with global imperial domination? Will the rich be heavily taxed and income and wealth be redistributed? Will the environment, both global and local, be protected? Will the right to organize be made a reality? If such elementary prerequisites of any decent future look impossible under the present system, then the people should take it into their own hands to create a new society that will deliver these genuine goods. (page 139)[[56]](#footnote-56)

END

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