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Britain

Two victories for the Campaign against Climate Change

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Britain's largest trade union has affiliated to the Campaign against Climate Change (CCC), reflecting alarm across the labour movement at the Labour government's plans to replace its aging nuclear submarines and power stations. It was the second major advance made by the Campaign in the same month: More than 350 people packed into the Campaign against Climate Change national conference on June 3 to discuss stepping up action against the devastation facing humanity unless we act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sellafield.jpg>]

Britain's Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant

The 1.3 million strong union for local government workers, UNISON, voted at its national conference to campaign against a new generation of nuclear power stations in Britain. It affiliated to both CCC and Stop Climate Chaos, an alliance of CCC and other NGOs.

The decision followed controversial statements by the two leading Labour party ministers. Speaking in Parliament, Prime Minister Tony Blair advocated nuclear power as a solution for Britain and "many other countries around the world", although Blair is an aggressive opponent of Iran's nuclear power programme. Finance minister Gordon Brown fanned the flames at his major annual speech, at London's Mansion House.

Brown declared Labour's long term commitment to replace Trident, Britain's aging nuclear submarine fleet. A huge wave of protest is sweeping across the labour movement, demanding that the Trident budget be spend on public services. Most British people oppose the replacement, which is estimated to cost Â£25 billion.

Earlier in June the CCC conference brought together existing activists together with those wanting to get involved. Much of the traditional left was absent - though Respect supporters, including members of the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Resistance were present in significant numbers.

There is widespread acceptance in Britain that urgent action is needed now to prevent the planet reaching a fatal point of no return. The state-owned BBC TV company has just run a "climate chaos" season fronted by veteran natural history broadcaster David Attenborough.

New stories around global warming appear in much of the press on a very regular basis. Indeed, it could seem that the battle has finally been won in many places - except one rather key player: the Presidential incumbent of the US White House.

What is now much more the focus of debate - including amongst activists - is what strategies to adopt in this situation.

The new Conservative party leader David Cameron is parading his green credentials. This is part of an increasing push for green capitalism which was also reflected at the conference itself. The radical left urgently needs to push environmental issues in general, and climate change in particular, up the agenda.

We should expose the lie that it is possible to address the issue of climate change merely through technical fixes while, of course, supporting the introduction of alternative renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power. We need a major reduction in the fossil fuel burn.

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We need to tackle head on the lie that nuclear power is part of the solution - as Attenborough argued in his programme and as New Labour heads, Blair and Brown, are increasingly set on.

Most crucially we need to win the argument that capitalism cannot solve the problem which it has created, the problem of destroying the environment in its relentless search for greater and greater profits.

At the CCC conference, former Labour environment minister Michael Meacher, tore into the Blair government in an angry speech argued that "big business is not the solution; big business is the cause of the problem".

Meacher also condemned Blair's support for nuclear power over renewable energy and support from the expansion of air travel and criticised Brown's tax on SUVs as inadequate. He spoke of the need for a "New world energy order".

Green Party MEP Caroline Lucas was right to argue that activists need to go beyond frightening people with the horrors that climate change will bring, but also need to present a credible version of a low carbon future.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Dec05London.jpg>]

Climate change demo December 2005, London

Both gave militant speeches and both are sincere in their support for the campaign and the need for urgent action now. But criticising big business as Meacher did is not enough - the profit motive also operates for small businesses too. The Green Party puts much of its faith in "localisation" which challenges a system which uses vast quantities of carbon dioxide to fly food across the globe, but places too much confidence in a localised version of capitalism - an impossible utopia.

In her speech Lucas made a side-swipe at Marxists by bracketing together Adam Smith and Karl Marx as advocates of growth - and therefore part of the problem.

While some individuals and currents have advocated a "productivist" road while quoting Marx as their source, not only do Marx and Engels writing show a concern for the environment but there is a long history of Marxist writing and activism on the subject, much of which has been buried by the legacy of Stalinism, like so much else.

Marx's economics distinguishes between "use values" and "exchange values". This provides an essential tool for environmentalists. The problem is not simply a question of "growth" posed as a neutral category, but whether that growth is socially useful and (even where it is) what its environmental and other costs will be.

Another key issue for the campaign, which Lucas alluded to in her comments about developing a positive vision, is how to motivate people and convince them that mass action can make a difference.

For the campaign, the next major target is to ensure that the demonstration on November 4, just before the next round of International Climate talks starts in Nairobi, is even bigger than last year's showing of 10,000.

This time round in Britain there will not only be the Campaign against Climate Change itself, which organised the successful event in 2005, but the Stop Climate Chaos umbrella group.

Stop Climate Chaos brings together a whole range of NGOs from Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace to Christian Aid and Oxfam and is a classic lobbying organisation.

It is obviously right for the campaign to be part of it and support its actions which currently focus on sending

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postcards to 10 Downing Street, where Britain's cabinet meets.

But the lesson from so many other areas of activity will be that the left will need to be at the centre of bringing people onto the streets.

From this point of view it is important that the Campaign retains its own integrity and continues to debate strategy and tactics.

One step forward at the conference was the decision of the small but useful trade union workshop to set up a trade union network within the campaign as a way of sharing information and experiences about what is going on in different unions and to build for the November demonstration.

The network also hopes to try to organise a fringe meeting at this year's Trade Union Congress in Brighton and to plan meetings at next year's individual union conferences.

On the other hand, it was regrettable that the Annual General Meeting of the campaign, which was squeezed into an hour at the end of a long day, and was probably attended by a minority of those at the conference. It decided not to accept the recommendations of the outgoing committee on its new structure - on the argument that there were "too many socialists on it".

Socialist Resistance supporters have been involved in the campaign both because we think this issue is a central one for the left and the labour movement and because we believe we have a particular contribution to make.

We think that there is an even greater need for the campaign to clarify its own politics with the development of Stop Climate Chaos and hope to play our part in doing so however we can.

The nuclear debates in Britain have mobilised huge numbers in the past, and are likely to do so in the future. Socialists argue for the climate campaigners to connect the nuclear issues to allies in the international labour and peace movements.