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Ecology

Ecology debate

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV334 - October 2001 -

Publication date: Sunday 14 October 2001

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The International Executive Committee (IEC) of the Fourth International meeting in October 2000 adopted a draft resolution on "[Ecology and Socialism](#)" which was published in IV 327. The IEC decided that the text should be discussed publicly in the press of the international. We publish below three contributions to this debate.

The essential is lacking!

Manuel (Germany)

The draft resolution on Ecology and Socialism proposed by the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International is very good. It is an appetizing snack but the main course is missing, even if this latter only amounted to a small chapter.

The question is not only whether the workers' movement in general and the revolutionary Marxist current in particular has shown some backwardness in the area of considering ecological problems. That much is obvious and the draft resolution is a good point of departure for correcting this weakness.

The essential question is no longer whether Marx and Engels were "green" enough in their time. The response of the draft to this is balanced and thus correct.

I think that it would be right to stress more strongly the farsightedness of the two founders of scientific socialism a century before the report of the "Club of Rome", by quoting for example the very beginning of the Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875) where Marx rejects the thesis that labour is the sole source of wealth, saying that nature is just as much the source and that labour power itself is only a force of nature.

In fact, our spiritual "grandparents" were better armed than many subsequent socialists and ecologists to face problems which are today much clearer than in their time. For example, Marx spoke not of the "environment" but of the land as an "anorganic" (ie non-organismic) body of humanity. In what state is our "non-organismic" body now? Very sick, perhaps already dying.

But why does the draft resolution lack the essential?

I do not see addressed in this text the question of whether and to what extent the dimension and the new consciousness of ecological problems challenges the heart of our program and our specific emancipatory project. This question must be posed and met with an initial reply, which can provide the basis for a more fundamental response.

Our project of society is based on material preconditions: 1) on the degree of development of the productive forces by capitalism; 2) on the sources of accumulation of a society in transition to socialism; 3) on the sources of accumulation of a world socialist society.

Our project is a classless; self managed society, in which commodity relations are abolished. To avoid all false scholastic debate on the periodisation of a desired future, we say that we fight for a society with a dynamic involving the withering away of social inequality, the state, money and the commodity.

No, this does not presuppose an unlimited growth. We have long stressed the view that following a certain degree of satisfaction of material needs, human beings tend to flourish in creative and cultural activities rather than through the consumption of material goods. Nonetheless that presupposes two essential choices; a) a radical diminution of working time and b) a relative abundance of means of consumption.

A society with an emancipatory dynamic presupposes the liberation of individuals from existential economic constraints and a lot of free time for everyone; if not, the scarcity of goods will lead to a re Commodification of relationships, or to bureaucratic means of distribution; if not, the scarcity of free time would recreate substitutionism, cultural, administrative and political elitism, paternalist conservatism in the workplaces, in personal relations and in the entire society.

Devastation

Indeed, the destructive devastation wrought by contemporary capitalism and the growing consciousness of the destructive dangers of a good number of established techniques of production and products massively manufactured today weigh increasingly on the productivity gains made and on the potential of future means of accumulation.

We must then take into account this problematic, with 2 consequences:

a) the Ecology and Socialism resolution should adopt a new tone, it should sound the alarm.

Because of the accumulated ecological risks, humanity is threatened; already today scientific debate opposes those who think that the "point of no return" (in the area of extermination of the species, the water supply, the erosion of cultivable lands and so on) has already been reached and those who think that it is not yet completely the case.

From this very fact the emancipatory project is in danger - and that is certain. To the extent that ecological responsibility would force a humanity aspiring to humanize itself to preserve scarcity, extend the working day, conserve inequalities, accentuate the social division of labour, the material means of a universal emancipation would decompose.

b) the resolution should sketch the state of the wealth acquired as well as the potential funds of accumulation of a post capitalist society which would aspire to evolve towards socialism, taking into consideration the ecological problems. It should calculate the costs materially and in labour time of;

- a healthy production of food in an ecologically responsible fashion;
- the development of an ecologically responsible industrial and energy production (the draft refers to, for example, the problem of the chemical industry)
- the reconversion of production of ecologically irresponsible products (the draft refers to cars, one could add planes and so on);
- the work of repairing the damage already done (for example the management of the nuclear waste accumulated up until now);

We should calculate what remains to finance the material bases of an emancipatory dynamic, to finance the free

distribution of consumer and service goods, and to reduce significantly the working day.

Without such a calculation, the emancipatory project remains a pious wish. The resolution should sketch the problem and the World Congress should establish a commission of economists to draw up an exact calculation.

The Fourth International should then rewrite such texts as, notably, that of Ernest Mandel in Marxist Economic Theory on "sources of international socialist accumulation" for the rich, intermediary and poor countries as well as for a world socialist society taken overall with the hypothesis of a short term victory of a world socialist society.

It should also encourage FI sections and comrades everywhere to elaborate similar studies for societies in transition to socialism in their respective countries and regions. A work moreover which should be renovated every five years as things evolve, worsen ...

Thus will be forged a clear consciousness of the real state of the material bases for our emancipatory project, as well as a consciousness of the urgency of replacing the existing regimes by socialist democracy everywhere in the world.

Another world is not possible without another mode of production

François (Switzerland)

The most important aspect of the draft resolution Ecology and Socialism is in my view the stress placed on the necessity of challenging the productivist illusion that Marxists have held to, whether intentionally or not.

"The ecology question is one of the greatest challenges for a renewal of Marxist thought at the dawn of the 21st century. It demands of Marxists a thorough critical reappraisal of their traditional concept of 'productive forces' and a radical break with the ideology of linear progress and the technological and economic paradigm of modern industrial civilization."

However, the justification for this necessary revision should flow from a critical balance sheet of the technical process of current production which emerged from the industrial revolution and not only from noting the devastation it leads to.

I would not say that this draft "lacks the essential" as Manuel from Germany has said in his contribution, but based as it is on an "ecological" vision of the process of production chosen by capitalism rather than on a global critique of this process, it can only lead to illusions and to political dead ends.

If the process is considered only as damaging to the environment and those who inhabit it, it would suffice to reduce production through a "halt to growth" where damage is reduced by encouraging people to 'act locally' without 'thinking globally'. Indeed we know that a part of current production is largely insufficient to respond to the needs of humanity and that on the other hand it is no longer possible to make it "respectful of the environment".

These limitations of the capitalist process of production (CPP) do not stem from the priority given to the quest for profit nor from the damage wrought by the inevitable consumption of fossil fuels, by the massive wastes of material that it inevitably involves or by the pathologies linked to the generalization and intensification of human labour.

The main limit is in the very nature of this process based on recourse to fossil energy resources on the way to being exhausted, on the massive use of non-renewable materials and on the insane exploitation of human labour.

Obsolete

If it seemed to be viable and promising when the planet contained six times less human beings and the integrality of its fossil reserves, after more than a century of intensive pillage this process has shown itself to be totally obsolete.

Its generalization from the industrialized regions to the entire world would lead very quickly to the exhaustion of the rare fossil resources that remain. Moreover, it is so dependent on human labour that the indispensable reduction of labour time proves less and less possible.

Certainly the possessors and defenders of the apparatus of fossil production argue that it can be reformed through new innovatory technologies - fuel cells, fusion, robotisation, improvement of yields and other measures to ensure its hypothetical "sustainable development". However, these perspectives are illusory with no confirmation of their feasibility in the current state of knowledge and research.

One could imagine that capitalism can purely and simply abandon the process of production that it has chosen and imposed. However, this overlooks the fact that this choice allows the owners of the means of production to extract surplus value during the transformation by labour of non-renewable energy and material resources.

Beyond the disastrous economic and political consequences of an "industrial counter-revolution" it is hard to see how the dominant minority - six million millionaires out of six billion human beings - could bring it about without disappearing into the dustbin of history.

If technological mini-reforms - treatment of waste, recycling of materials, economies of energy - are so much tarnished by ideology, it is to better ward off the imminent crisis of the CPP.

The announcements of a coming recourse to clean energy, a healthy food production, habitat and health for all human beings or the end of work are alibis. If capital was really ready to consider a challenge to its method of production there would be evidence of the fact; indeed, what we know and see is all to the contrary; poverty, famine, pollution, catastrophes, conflicts ... in short, a state of affairs such that another world becomes impossible.

As the durable development of profit intrudes on that of humanity and its world, alternatives are only developed when they open up new perspectives of commodification and accumulation.

Thus, for example, the project of the harnessing of solar energy only seeks the concentration of this energy in order that it can at last be transformed into a commodity.

The CPP is out of breath. It withers on every front and aggravates the world crises - war, exoduses, pandemics, hecatombs - engendered by growing inequality in the face of scarcities of water, arable land, combustibles, materials, food, medicaments and public services.

There are several reasons why this crisis of the process of production is so badly perceived, including by many comrades:

Although recent, the fossil process born from the industrial, technical and scientific revolution of the past century appears to us the best and the only possible process, unavoidable and irreplaceable. Thus, we consider the numerous prior processes of production based on exclusive recourse to solar, hydraulic, wind, biomass, or wood as sources of energy as retrograde, outmoded and inefficient although they supported humanity through several millennia. Yet these alternative processes are all the more viable and powerful in that the extraordinary scientific and technical development in the course of the capitalist period could today allow the mastering of all of them.

Another obstacle to the comprehension of the limits of the CPP, its immediate advantages - cars, planes, material and energetic abundance - mask its inconveniences. We are only beginning to suffer the effects of it but current levels pollution are probably only trifling compared with the catastrophes to come.

The productivist illusion has turned our critical attention from the disillusionment that the CPP brings. If the proletariat takes control of the apparatus of fossil production, it is argued, it could be made efficient, generous and harmonious.

Such a blind optimism would postpone the critique of the CPP to the day after the revolution when the victorious proletariat would have the time to socialize it. It is why the technical and scientific contradictions of the fossil process have not been grasped as a weapon in the class struggle.

Lack of analysis of the technical process of production. We have seen capitalist exploitation as taking place only through human labour because it was immediately perceptible. The major capitalist exploitation of the resources of the nature, whose effects are much more serious but are differentiated in time, have not been perceived.

Thus the social factor has been limited to the exploited workers alone whereas the CPP exploits - indirectly but as much if not more - all oppressed human beings by the progressive deprivation of not only a part of their wage but also their means of existence and survival, their common well being.

The current productive impasse has repercussions for our political project, burdened by a propositional vacuum. We are between the Charybdis of a crisis of economic growth, catastrophic for the survival of the species and the Scylla of a disastrous out of control commodity production of trash.

Without denouncing the process of production and opposing it to another possible mode the workers' movement is caught in a trap: nuclear power or candles, growth or famine, alienating work or unemployment.

All the ingredients nonetheless exist to favour a flourishing of the forces of nature; capitalism is pregnant with a technological revolution.

The critique of productivism allows us not just to explain the crisis of the environment; but also to oppose to it a revolutionary outcome. That is why the critique of the CPP should be deepened and should constitute the point of departure of the resolution: the Fourth International "should sound the alarm" as Manuel writes.

On biodiversity

Terry (Canada)

In my opinion, the section 'Threats to Biodiversity' in the Ecology and Socialism resolution fudges one of the central

issues. The document does this by resorting to a series of passive constructions in order to avoid naming humanity as the principal subject of the destruction of biodiversity.

The document states: "the existence of tens of thousands of species is menaced by the countless attacks on ecosystems".

I think the document needs to state that it is the extraordinary and unsustainable multiplication of human communities that is the central reason for this threat.

The document should acknowledge that there is an optimum level for the human population in a world that is biologically diverse. Beyond this optimum level, biodiversity is threatened - regardless of whether or not capitalist or socialist relations of production prevail on the planet. In my opinion, we are already at and probably well beyond this optimum level even now.

Similarly, the document should not continue to argue from a human-centric point of view that, "biodiversity must be defended, not for sentimental or aesthetic reasons, but on behalf of our own species".

This kind of thinking is not radical enough. We need to be making the argument that "biodiversity should be defended because biodiversity underpins the existence of all life on this planet, including the human race." We should not continue shortsighted formulas that single out the interests of the human race when we are dealing with the issue of biodiversity.

Biodiversity involves the recognition of a mutual set of interests linking the human race with the multiplicity of other life forms.