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Environment

Work two hours a day to save the climate and biodiversity

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It has been repeated often in these columns: while indispensable in the short term to avoid the climatic disaster of the “oven planet”, the passage from fossil fuels to renewables is not possible without a substantial reduction in production and transport. A complete change of energy system is needed, requiring huge investment - energy consumption is currently 80% fossil-based and therefore a source of emissions. In other words: without a very strong reduction in other sectors, the energy transition will greatly increase greenhouse gas emissions.

This reasoning is confirmed by the IPCC special report on 1.5 Å° C warming. According to this, to have even half a chance of not exceeding 1.5 Å° C of global warming, net global emissions of CO₂ must decrease by 58% by 2030, by 100% by 2050 and be negative between 2050 and 2100. Since fossil fuels cover 80% of mankind's energy needs, it is obvious that such a drastic reduction in emissions is not possible without a reduction in the amount of energy used, and such a significant decrease cannot simply be the result of consumption savings or a spontaneous rise in energy efficiency - in other words: ultimately, it is necessary to produce and travel less.

Produce less, convey less, share more

According to the IPCC, a scenario without exceeding the 1.5 Å° C threshold requires reducing global energy consumption by 15% in 2030 and 32% by 2050. These figures are actually underestimated because they are based on a scenario in which the share of nuclear energy increases by 59% in 2030 and by 150% in 2050 (about 200 additional plants worldwide). [1] If we exclude nuclear madness (and we must), it follows that energy consumption must decrease by at least 20% in 2030 and by 40% in 2050. Reductions of this magnitude are not feasible without a substantial reduction in activity in the sphere of production.

Proponents of green capitalism tell us that the ecological/climate crisis is a great opportunity to revive the global economy, to create new markets and therefore new jobs. This is an obvious counter-truth. This productivist discourse leads us straight to the transformation of the ecological disaster into a cataclysm, what scientists call the “oven planet”. To avoid the cataclysm, it is urgent to produce less, to transport less, to share more.

As a priority, sharing wealth and distributing the necessary work to all, that is, reducing working time without loss of pay, with reduced work rates, so with more than proportional hiring (This article does not examine the question of domestic labour, which should however be taken into account to draw up a plan of eco-socialist transition). This demand is at the heart of the eco-socialist alternative urgently needed today.

Quantity and quality of work

How much should working time be reduced for climate stabilization? The question can be answered from the “residual carbon budget” (i.e. the amount of CO₂ that can still be sent into the atmosphere to have a certain probability of not exceeding a certain warming limit). The scientific publications synthesized by the IPCC give estimates of this “budget” at the global scale, of 1.5 Å° C and 2 Å° C. Just divide them by the population to have the residual carbon budget per person.

Knowing the carbon intensity of the economy (the amount of CO₂ per unit of GDP) and the productivity of labour (in dollars per hour), we can then calculate the working time which respects the carbon budget. According to a researcher who did the calculation for 2 Å° C, this maximum working time would be a little less than six hours per week for OECD countries. [2]

It's only an estimate, and it should be taken with caution. First, it assumes a linear relationship between hours of work and greenhouse gas emissions, unchanged carbon intensity of the economy, and unchanged intensity of labour, and each of these points is questionable. Secondly, the sharing of the overall residual carbon budget is done without taking into account the differentiated responsibilities of the countries of the South and the North, which is unfair.

Above all, the estimate is incomplete: apart from ignoring the free hours devoted to domestic work (which patriarchy imposes mainly on women), it only approaches work in terms of the number of hours worked; that is to say, in terms of quantity. However, the ecological transition also requires the quality of work to be taken into account: stopping the ecological and social disaster requires the elimination of unnecessary or harmful activities in order to develop others, or even to create new ones.

Suppressing useless and harmful production

A long list of unnecessary and harmful production and transport (in whole or in part) could be drawn up: weapons production, automobile production, agribusiness input production, petrochemical plastics production, transportation of fossil fuels (30% of maritime transport), agribusiness-related transport (a quarter of global transport), planned obsolescence of products and so on. We know - or we could know - for each of these activities the amount of fossil energy consumed, and therefore the greenhouse gas emissions. It would therefore be possible to draw up an emergency plan for the rapid reduction of emissions by eliminating this production and transport (it goes without saying that this plan must guarantee the maintenance of employment and the incomes of the workers in these sectors).

This angle of attack is almost totally absent from the scientific work on reducing emissions. There is not a single referenced scientific publication, to my knowledge, that makes an inventory of emissions that could be removed by stopping the production of weapons, for example. [3] Why ? Because most researchers who work on climate change mitigation scenarios are subject to the productivist dogma of capitalist profit, competition, and so on. The IPCC writes: "Climate models assume fully functioning markets and competitive market behaviour". [4]

Develop and create care activities for people and ecosystems

Activities to be developed or created can be classified into three categories based on their carbon footprint. Firstly, activities related to the transformation of the energy system (production of renewable energy converters, networking, massive conversion to rail and public transport and so on) involve significant greenhouse gas emissions. Secondly, many service activities that have a low carbon footprint are to be massively developed in the personal care sector (early childhood care, the disabled, elderly and sick, reinvestment in education and health and so on) and nature care (planting hedges, creating wetlands, ecological networks of territories and so on). The third category includes productive activities whose necessary ecological reorientation will reduce carbon emissions: the dismantling of agribusiness, the meat industry, productivist forestry and industrial fishing fall into this category. However, this ecological reorientation requires a huge increase in the number of people employed in agriculture, livestock, forestry and fishing.

We need millions of workers!

Take a sector that we do not talk about very much, that of fishing. The comparison between industrial fishing and small-scale fishing (boats of 15m or less) is enlightening. Industrial fishing and small-scale fishing each year take the same tonnage of fish for human consumption: thirty million tons. The first - receiving \$ 25-27 billion in subsidies - employs about 500,000 people, consumes 37 million tons of fuel, emits 8 to 20 million tons of fuel into the sea, and transforms another 35 million tons into oil or animal feed. The second - which receives only 5 to 7 billion in subsidies - employs twelve million people, consumes 5 million tons of fuel, rejects a negligible amount of catch, and transforms almost no fish into oil or animal feed.

In addition, the comparative efficiency of the two systems is irrefutable: one to two tonnes of fish per tonne of fuel for industrial fishing, four to eight tonnes for small fishing! [5] The data available for agriculture, livestock and forestry tell the same story: breaking with the industrial exploitation of resources is good for the climate, good for biodiversity, good for public health and potentially very, very good for employment. Neo-Malthusian misanthropists claim that half of humanity must disappear to save nature; however, this is false: in reality, “saving nature” requires changes in production methods that require the collaboration of millions of workers!

An eco-socialist plan is needed

Considering all of this, how much would it take to reduce working time? We see that the answer is not so simple. There is a certainty: it is certainly necessary to work much, much less: this is what is indicated to us by the calculation of the maximum number of working hours compatible with the residual carbon budget (less than 6 hours per week in the countries of the OECD), and the mass of useless or harmful productions to be suppressed. But the protection of psychological and physical health also requires working much less quickly, to drastically reduce the hardship of work.

On the other hand, it is necessary to take account of all these activities to be developed or created, some of which can drastically reduce emissions or even absorb large amounts of carbon. These activities contain enormous amounts of jobs that are socially and ecologically useful, and therefore meaningful. Balancing all these components underlines the urgent need for very large-scale ecological and social planning. Democracy in developing this planning is absolutely crucial. This is a condition sine qua non of success and this condition reinforces the need for a radical reduction of working time, without loss of wages.

“The only possible freedom”

The overproduction-overconsumption cycle is the source not only of environmental destruction and social inequality, but also endless frustrations. The escalation of more and more disproportionate desires does not lead to freedom but to slavery. True freedom is in self-limitation. As Marx says, “Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature.... But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy, which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite”. The ecological crisis teaches us that, even more than in the time of Marx, the reduction of working time is today the “essential condition” of a rational management of the “exchanges of matter” between humanity and nature.

Two hours a day

In the name of realism in the face of degraded power struggles, some people will shrink from the idea of fighting for the duration of work to be reduced to two days per week at most. “It is already so difficult to mobilize, to raise awareness of the ecological crisis, useless to load the boat yet,” they say. This may not be quite the right conclusion to draw from the analysis of the situation. Certainly, our social camp needs victories, even limited ones (for example the restoration of the age of the pension to 65 years!).

But it also needs a social project. Perhaps the prospect of a very radical reconquest of time is the best way to win the popular classes to the need for an eco-socialist transformation that will certainly involve giving up the satisfaction of alienated needs, consumerist desires that are disproportionate and serve as a miserable compensation for a miserable social existence.

This was the message of Paul Lafargue, Marx’s son-in-law, in his “right to laziness”: a time of employment of three hours per day maximum. In the face of the ecological crisis, it is time, high time, to resume the process and update the demand. Two hours a day is probably enough to produce all the goods and services we really need “in the most dignified conditions and those most consistent with human nature.” Three hours a day would give workers time to discuss what is done or produced, how, and for what purpose.

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[1] IPCC, Special Report 1.5Å°C, Summary for Policymakers <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

[2] Philipp Frey, “The ecological limits of work”, *Autonomy*, April 2019.

[3] In the USA, this production is responsible for at least 150 million tonnes of CO2 per year.

[4] IPCC, AR5, WG3 full report.

[5] Jennifer Jacquet and Daniel Pauly, “Funding Priorities: Big Barriers to Small-Scale Fisheries”, *Conservation Biology*, Volume 22, No. 4, 832–835.