

Class struggle, not the market, to save the planet

by Green Left Australia
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An interview on climate, water, electricity, ecosocialism

A political economist and activist who directs the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa, Patrick Bond was a featured guest speaker at the Green Left Weekly Social Change ? Climate Change conference held in Sydney in April.

Author of a range of books, including Climate Change, Carbon Trading and Civil Society, Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation, and Walk left, Talk Right: South Africa's Frustrated Global Reforms, Bond is a long-time advocate for radical solutions to the climate and social catastrophe wrought by global capitalism.

Lauren Carroll Harris spoke to Bond at the conference about responses to climate change.

What has been the response of the market to the crisis of climate change and what role does carbon trading play?

Multinational corporations are trying to commodify the air, really, and the pollution in the air. They want the right to do that, and they want to commodify it with the legal language of contracts and put a price on it and get credit for having already polluted.

And in a sense they're going to get, as the European carbon trading system grants them, further rights to keep polluting. And that's cold, hard cash. They can sell those rights, so that it's not 'the polluter pays' principle, it's 'the polluter earns'.

With the European trading system, so many critiques have emerged from within the financial sector about what a crazed market it is. It is a kind of market that you get by creating all sorts of fictional goods, like an apparent reduction in emissions. Well, who's really to judge whether this reduction did really occur in the way that it was argued? You need a very complex regulatory process to find out if that in fact is the case, and whether emissions that would have taken place have been avoided and they should be given credit for it.

It must be determined whether additional emissions have really been mitigated, and what the value of that should be. So it's so hard to measure, and it's chaotic to police.

Mainstream environmentalists have such a hang-up about thinking outside their box - because they want to be relevant and maintain ties to the governments and to the UN system - that they're becoming more of a barrier to progress.

It is critical to call some groups on their support for carbon trading as a supposed solution, as it is putting money into the hands of some of the worst polluters and the financiers and hedge funds rather than actually getting the resources we need for a just transition.

Can the UN play a useful role in the campaign to stop runaway climate change?

Fifteen to twenty thousand people protested at the World Conference Against Racism [WCAR in Durban, South Africa, 2001] and over 30,000 at the Summit on Sustainable Development [SSD in Johannesburg, 2001]. Protesters basically said to the UN: 'You are now doing more harm than good, when you leave out addressing Zionism, leave out reparations for addressing the impacts of colonialism and Apartheid from the WCAR, and when you infuse the SSD with so much private-public partnership rhetoric that it puts up the world for sale and does nothing for poverty.'

The balance of forces on a global scale is so adverse to any progressive change, with neoliberals still dominant and neo-conservatives still being deployed by US President George Bush, like World Bank head Robert Zoellick. There is a neo-con/neo-lib fusion, and a basic acceptance by the global elites that the US can occupy Iraq, for instance.

And that means that, I fear, at the stage we're at of human history, global-scale solutions to reforming these multi-lateral institutions is an enormous waste of time and energy and a distraction from real activism.

I would say that the changes we need are so dramatic, that laziness and sloth you find in the UN prevents us from getting there. And the US's braking role in this is so powerful, and wouldn't change necessarily with a President Barack Obama.

So we really should be doing much more direct action, and local and international solidarity between groups that take serious campaigning issues such as 'Keep the oil in the soil', 'Keep the coal in the hole' and 'Keep resources in the ground'. That way, we really will build a movement, a movement of victims of climate change.

Environmental concerns are often pitted against workers' jobs by governments and the mainstream media. Do you think there is a convergence between workers' rights and environmental sustainability?

There are possibilities to take grievances that are overlapping and interlocking. We need to make the arguments for a just transition away from the really energy-intensive jobs with low pay and high danger, towards a job-safe alternative that could retrain these workers to put together

solar hot water heaters.

Sustainable alternatives could receive huge subsidies and be organised in a way that would meet all people's needs. It would require of course big infusions of money, but at least not big infusions of very scarce energy resources.

We have a situation where BHP Billiton has over a thousand workers in its major production cycle, and those workers may be threatened if we succeed in saying the smelters that BHP Billiton runs should be closed.

The reason people are calling for this is because the smelters take 10% of the electricity of the country and only give half a percent of GDP and have not created many jobs. The question is whether we can get a just transition arrangement that would allow those metal workers to instead be making hot water heaters with solar technologies and putting them together in millions of homes.

Those kind of job creation possibilities would be immense compared to the losses we would have if we shut down that

supply of electricity.

If the labour movement says 'we want to keep our jobs in the coal mines and in the smelters', we have to have a really frank talk and say 'Comrades, couldn't you find an alternative plan, with us, that gives you more jobs with better pay in the renewables sector, for example, in getting solar hot water heaters to be constructed en masse?'

Right now, it costs about A\$1000 for one of these heaters in South Africa. It would really have a big, big impact on people's electricity bills. And to get hot water, for a whole lot of people it would be their first time. Providing solar hot water heaters would be a wonderful new challenge that can unite community and labour if we do it properly.

When we really get the trade unions to think through with us how to protect their workers? jobs and move even more jobs into this sector. That's a formidable potential coalition.

Can you explain the current struggle to de-commodify water and electricity in South Africa?

All of life is a class struggle. The class struggle over who pays what for water and electricity is acute.

Suez, a big company from Paris, introduced really diabolical systems for controlling poor people's water in South Africa. The new 'buyer politics' involving prepaid meters and low-quality sanitation systems were introduced to control low-income people and limit their access to water. And the same was going on with electricity.

So the resistance has raised slogans like 'Destroy the meters, enjoy the water', or else just going to bypasses and reconnecting people who've been disconnected.

Women in the impoverished Johannesburg township of Soweto are unable to pay [for electricity], community groups come round, rip out the electricity meter and they do a bypass with the local electrician working for free, helping to get the electricity free.

That's really a great step forward for advancing people's confidence in fighting for reforms and making the system react. They won some free, basic electricity.

And then the big challenge is to say, how much further change do we have to make? Getting free electricity is important, because people have to be allowed to survive, but really the strategy is not just to make an individual act. Because then success hinges upon whether the electricity company and the sheriff can come in and find the disconnected meter and the electricity still on and do something about it. The task is to find the policy to actually sustain free basic electricity.

Campaigners are saying, 'when you hit the hedonistic levels of consumption of water and electricity, then you should really be paying a luxury consumption tax'. That would redistribute resources in the system so that poor people would get it.

So in that way you'd decommodify it by providing it to people for free at the low consumption side, and high consumers

get nailed with the luxury tax to also encourage conservation - so we don't build more coal-fired power plants or huge dams.

Hopefully, we get both red and green in that struggle and raise the spectre of socialism as a broader way to address these problems.

Some environmentalists promote a user-pays response to climate change, which seeks to charge ordinary people more for basic services to encourage energy efficiency.

This is what divides the eco-socialist movement from the environmentalists who can only see rising prices as a disincentive to consume without any care for the impact that this has on poor people.

Low income automobile users stuck out in the suburbs in British Columbia, Canada, are being hit by the same petrol tax - a carbon tax that applies to petrol. And through no fault of their own - the crazy housing market with all of its capitalist speculation has led to housing being organised in this way - and through low-paying jobs, they're having to live further away. This makes them more addicted to their cars and they're more vulnerable to this tax.

So taking the class struggle into the climate campaign is so crucial. Not just for equity but to really have the right tactics.

A low-income person is still going to have to drive because public transport doesn't get out to those areas. If you really want to make the gains and raise the idea of actually building a public transport system, its going to require a much bigger luxury consumption tax on the rich who can afford it, and probably won't even really notice for a while that their prices are going up. We need to get to the point where they do notice and they do stop their hedonistic consumption.

In that case, what is needed to confront climate change?

Well, it's so interesting that even Al Gore can say he's not sure why we haven't seen more direct action at coal-fired electricity generators or coal mines. So if you kind of have a mandate from a major politician to go and do disruptions then it's about time - we all need to do a lot more.

If you think about the high profile autonomous projects around the world that have been considered successful - and stealing water and electricity in South Africa has been widely celebrated by autonomists - you have to say, well, that works for a little while.

But we really do need a longer term plan that will make the gains we've taken, on the streets and in the communities and in the shop floor, actually real. How can they be turned into good public policy?

There's always a huge danger that, when you fight as a socialist for a reform, that it ends up as a 'reformist' reform - it strengthens the system and legitimises it.

And obviously, no one wants to legitimise capitalism by just adding a bit of free water on top, but the kind of reforms that

socialist activists have in mind are instead 'non-reformist' reforms, because they allow more space to struggle and allow you to live another day to make a bigger demand and they give the movement more momentum.

And that the logic that you've built into a reform, like free basic water and free basic electricity, counteracts the internal dynamics and laws of motion of the capitalist system. So such reforms are not about strengthening the system, they're weakening its internal dynamics.

So I think anytime there's a struggle of the working class that establishes very strategic reforms with great muscle, with many members, with many coalition and alliance partners, then we're talking about the possibility of challenging the capitalist system in very serious ways.

And a serious challenge to the capitalist system is what we need now to save the planet. An organised socialist planet is going to be required.

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