

# Marxism and the Environmental Crisis

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Over the next ten, twenty or fifty years humanity faces an immense environmental crisis as a result of rapid and chaotic climate change. Indeed the crisis is already underway and its effects are already being felt in many parts of the world such as nearly submerged low lying Pacific islands and drought stricken Sudan

People often talk of the need to 'save the planet' but planet earth will survive any amount of climate change. In reality it is living creatures – human beings and animals – who will suffer, who will be wiped out in their millions and hundreds of millions or even face extinction.

In the face of this crisis there is one overriding question. What has to be done to bring climate change under control and prevent the catastrophe? In this article I shall argue that to answer this we need a Marxist understanding of society and to actually take the necessary action we need socialist politics.

The problem is not primarily scientific or technical. The basic science of climate change is simple, well established and widely agreed by all scientists not funded by the likes of Exxon Mobile with a vested interest in denying it. It is that global warming is caused by the increasing emission of 'greenhouse' gasses, such as carbon dioxide, which form a kind of blanket in the earth's atmosphere and prevent heat from the sun escaping into space. In scientific terms the solution is equally simple: drastically reduce carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions.

The real problem, therefore, is political: why does our society continue, as it does, producing greenhouse gases at a disastrously high level? Why does it not take the obvious measures required to avoid the impending catastrophe: switch from oil, gas and coal as the main sources of power to non-carbon emitting sources such as wind, solar, and tidal power; slash dependency on the carbon emitting private car by enormously improving public transport; institute a general programme of house insulation.

Understanding why these things are not being done is where Marxist analysis is essential. Marx showed that the driving force of capitalism is not human need or social welfare or even consumer choice, but the need for profit and the accumulation of capital. Capitalism is based on competition at every level – between corner shops and supermarkets, between international corporations and between national economies.

It is not just the greed of the bosses; this competition compels every capitalist firm and economy to attempt to maximise its profits and its accumulation of capital, on pain of bankruptcy or being taken over or marginalised. '*Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets ... Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake*', is how Marx described the basic law of capitalism.

Moreover Marx explained that in capitalist societies governments do not serve the people as they claim, but the interests of the capitalist class. If it is in the interests of the capitalist class to allow global warming to continue that is what capitalist governments will do, despite all their talk of going green.

But, surely, some people argue, it is just as much in the interests of the capitalists to stop catastrophic climate change as it is the rest of us. There are two key features of the system which make this not the case and Marxist analysis points to both of them. The first is domination of the world by a few giant corporations. Marx showed that this concentration of capital was the inevitable result of competition. As he put it 'One capitalist always kills many,' so

the ownership of capital becomes concentrated in ever fewer hands.

These are the ten biggest companies in the world (according to Fortune 500):

	Revenues (\$mill)	Profits (\$mill)
Wall-Mart	408,216	14,335
Royal Dutch Shell	285,129	12,518
Exxon Mobile	284,650	19,280
BP	246,134	16,578
Toyota	204,106	2,256
Japan Post Holdings	202,196	4,849
Sinopec	187,496	5,756
State Grid	184,456	343
AXA	175,257	5,012
China National Petroleum	165,496	10,272

Thus we can see that four of the top five and seven of the top ten of these hugely powerful companies are in oil, gas and cars and so have a direct interest in carbon emitting fossil fuels. The second factor is the international competition between states (on behalf their respective capitalists). This means that the world's biggest carbon polluters – USA, China, Europe, India etc – face each other as competitors and each fears that if it makes the needed cuts in emissions it will lose out to its rivals who will not reciprocate.

This analysis has been borne out in practice by the behaviour of Obama and the US at the Copenhagen Climate Change talks in 2009. Despite the fact that Obama, unlike Bush, certainly does understand the science of climate change, he intervened personally in Copenhagen to scupper any binding targets for carbon emission reduction.

This Marxist analysis of capitalism as the main cause of climate change and the main obstacle to its prevention differs radically from the views put across in the media or by the Greens or many people in the environmental movement. It rejects the view that the cause of climate change is individual greed and the solution is for all of us to 'do our bit'. This cannot work because power in capitalist society is so unequal. However much ordinary people cut back and sacrifice it will not stop the big corporations using fossil fuels.

Similarly, it rejects the idea that the problem is overpopulation. Carbon emissions are proportional to the level of capitalist economic development not population. The US produces 19.5 metric tons per person, Ireland 10.6 million tons, China 2.6 million and Ethiopia only 0.04 million. Trying to restrict the world's population, which always has racist and reactionary implications, will not tackle the central problem at all.

Identifying capitalism as the problem also points to the solution. If capitalist corporations and states are the main polluters what is needed is a social force that is more powerful than these corporations and states. The point of Marxism – the central idea running through all of Marx – is that such a force does exist in the shape of the international working class.

The capitalists everywhere depend on the workers everywhere for all their production and all their profits. Without workers labour the whole system seizes up – its factories, call-centres, i planes, trains, lorries and shops, all grind to a halt. At the same time the development of capitalism increases the size of the working class – there are now major working classes in China, India, Africa, Latin America where once were mainly peasants – and concentrates them in great cities such as Shanghai, Cairo and Sao Paolo.

Clearly what we are talking about here is potential power. To realise that power, working class people have to become active in their millions and united in struggle. This is not easily achieved but there is no other social force that has anything like this potential.

Several conclusions follow from this analysis.

1. Socialists who base their politics on Marxism need to be in the forefront of building the anti climate change movement, arguing their case.
2. Socialists have to work to raise awareness of the real causes of climate change in the labour movement and among working people everywhere.
3. The struggle against climate change needs to be linked to all the other struggles of working people against the cuts, the bankers, the bosses, war, racism and so on. And in all theses struggles, socialists have to work to increase the understanding among working people that they need to take over the running of society themselves.

It is just about possible that capitalism could, theoretically, resolve the climate crisis before it is too late. It is also more than likely that it won't. We can't afford to take the chance. The whole future of humanity depends on it.

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