

UK: A new front in the fight against climate change

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?WE WILL not be led quietly to annihilation by the elites and government? it is not only our right, but our moral duty to bypass the government?s inaction and flagrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself.?

So reads the opening proclamation of Extinction Rebellion, the new environmental movement launched in Parliament Square on 31 October. It is both a sharp riposte to the dithering political establishment and an urgent break with the mainstream lobbying strategy exemplified by corporate monoliths like Greenpeace.

The campaign?s inaugural action is a call to arms in the wake of the United Nations warning that we have just 12 years to avert catastrophic climate change. The point was rammed home in recent studies which show that vertebrate populations have declined by 60 per cent on average since the 1970s, a third of amphibians face extinction, and insect life is disappearing at a rate which threatens the ecological basis of life as we know it. Summed up: humanity?s model of exploiting the natural environment has triggered a period of ?biological annihilation? on a par with the five great mass extinctions of history.

There is growing scientific consensus that any global warming beyond 1.5C would trigger a ?tipping point?, beyond which no remedial action could stop runaway climate change. These apocalyptic climate change warnings, projected since at least the late 1980s, are now concentrating minds to the extent that even great institutions of the capitalist system like the World Bank have been obliged to acknowledge that a warming world might ?not be compatible? with civilisation.

Only those politicians who are completely bought and paid for by the fossil fuel industry now deny the facts in front of them. But acknowledgement is not action: we now produce more CO2 year on year than when climate change first emerged into the public consciousness 30 years ago. It is for this reason that many in the scientific community are suffering from a feeling of despair. It is also why hundreds of them have taken an important step into the arena of action by backing the Extinction Rebellion.

Fatalism is an understandable response when confronted with the almost unimagineable consequences of runaway climate change and the scale of the challenge needed to prevent it. But we have not reached the point of no return yet.

It is possible, by changing our economic model, to radically transform the way we relate to the environment and thereby mitigate the worst effects of climate change by keeping any rise in temperature to less than 1.5C. History also shows us, from the ending of slavery, through the Russian Revolution, to the the fight for civil rights, that ordinary people are capable of rapidly achieving momentous social changes.

But there is no overstating the gravity of the crisis. Today, the capitalist parties, whether social-democratic

or conservative, wedded as they are to the market, are incapable of delivering the kind of action we need. The market rules all, and for decades to come it will be more profitable to continue with the established dirty industries than to invest in renewables. These are decades we do not have.

Even if it were true that, in the long term, renewable energy is more profitable, if you take into account the damage to the economy from climate change, it does not matter. Capitalism functions on short term investments and profits, those who look to benefit decades down the line will lose out to cheaper competitors before they get the chance to come out on top.

It is true that governments have been able to subordinate individual parts of the economy to the collective good ? but only during times of war or great economic crisis, when the capitalist state is motivated to act to save the national capitalist class as a whole. The ruling class only tolerates such inroads into the sanctity of private property temporarily, and any partial gains or concessions are not tolerated indefinitely, as the decades long offensive against the NHS and Welfare State demonstrates.

The series of crises that have characterised the capitalist system since the 1970s are rooted in the declining rate of profit. Masked for a time by cheap credit and attacks on the public sector, the Great Recession of 2008 represented a new crisis of historic proportions, inaugurating a new period of intensified global economic competition and instability. In this context, the reforming programme of social-democracy based on skimming the super-profits of the imperialist centre and redistributing them in the form of higher wages or a social safety net is less and less tolerated by a capitalist class determined to subject the last bastions of the public sector like healthcare and education to the profit-driven rigour of the free market.

The ruling class? offer is expressed in a variety of forms, but what they all have in common is a selfish defence of their own privileges; on the one hand, the Macrons and Trudeaus content themselves with sticking plaster policies like fuel surcharges while, on the other, the Trumps and Bolsonaros simply fabricate their own reality and unleash the fossil capitalists while the world burns. In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn hopes to be the exception to the rule, but the ruling class, which, after all, owns the economy, will not permit this. He will either be forced to abandon any meaningful programme for slowing climate change or he must take another, more radical, road.

If we wanted to carry out even half of the measures advocated by the IPCC to limit global warming to 1.5, we would have to initiate a planned reorganisation of the economy on a fundamental and irreversible scale. To say less is to retreat into the Greenpeace style lobbying and acrobatic stunts which have generated a lot of hot air while the world plunges, eyes wide open, into catastrophe.

That is why Extinction Rebellion, with its focus on civil disobedience and mass mobilisation, is such a breath of fresh air. The sit-down on 17 November, which brought Westminster to a standstill, showed how we can tackle two of the biggest obstacles to mobilising people against climate change.

One of the principal problems is not that people don't care but just the opposite. Many people understand the dangers, but do not act because the existing initiatives reduce action to an individual responsibility ? home recycling, or letter-writing campaigns. The call for direct action, taken together with thousands of like-minded people, is demonstrably able to rouse people to act against the principal climate criminals: big business and their political servants.

Secondly, this action forced the issue of climate change onto the agenda. The media and politicians have a huge incentive to minimise awareness around climate change or to downplay its significance and to hide the necessary conclusions. The fossil fuel companies understood long ago that they could not dispel the overwhelming facts about climate change but that it also wasn't necessary. They only had to throw a

question mark over the issue to ensure people would not take the action needed and convince themselves that everything was probably going to be OK. Climate change has been a staple news fixture for years, but effective direct action lends the issue an urgency it desperately needs. Importantly, it takes the sphere of action out of the home and into the streets.

Extinction Rebellion demands the government enact legally binding policies to reduce UK carbon emissions to zero by 2025, and cooperate internationally to ensure the global economy runs on no more than half a planet's worth of resources per year. But it also takes up the call for a democratic citizens' assembly, elected by lottery, to oversee the changes creating a democracy fit for purpose.

Will getting arrested and convening an unaccountable and unrepresentative citizens' assembly change the world? No, but it is a break with the old, and approaches the issue from the right direction. Red Flag believes the left should support an initiative which has struck a chord and brought thousands of people into the streets.

Labour Party members should pass motions endorsing the campaign and calling on the leadership to do likewise. We should promote and participate in the actions, while expanding the campaign to target the companies as well as the politicians – occupy and shut down their headquarters and operations.

Trade unionists in the engineering, automotive, and energy industries have a vital role to play, but the Labour Party should take the lead by championing a policy of retraining and redeployment in the industries of the future which should be democratically planned, and run under the control of the workforce.

Peaceful civil disobedience is a powerful tactic when used in combination with other forms of action. But as the experience of anti-fracking protesters shows, any threat to private property will in the end be met with state violence. If we are determined to rebel to defend life itself, then we must be prepared to defend ourselves when they use their state to attack us.

Socialists should also back the call for mass assemblies to plan how to get out of the crisis, aiming to root them amongst the social class which has both the most to gain, and the power to change things – the working class. A randomly selected assembly with no social roots does not add up to a viable machinery for the social upheaval Extinction Rebellion hopes to bring about. But, if such bodies were composed of elected delegates, subject to recall, and linked to workplaces, neighbourhoods, and working class organisations, then they could become truly representative, and form the skeleton of a new political power, one which ordinary people have an incentive to participate in and defend.

These steps are necessary to save Earth's precious ecosystems, and avert catastrophe. But in the solution to the climate crisis lies the stimulus to create a better world in the process – to create a new kind of work, community, democracy, and, by overcoming a civilisation based on the exploitation of human by human, create a new relationship with the natural world, in which our planet's resources can be managed to more than meet the needs of all.

The clock is ticking and only the actions of working people can seize the initiative and power from politicians who have proved incapable, unwilling, or both, to act in the face of the imminent crisis confronting humanity. The future they are preparing for us is intolerable, but there is time yet to reject theirs and fight for our own.