

Six questions originally posed by Solidarity's Ecosocialist Working Group:

1. How does ecosocialist politics differ from traditional socialist and labor politics? To what extent does the kind of ecosocialist orientation we need today reflect a continuity with, and to what extent does it represent a break from, previous ideological and programmatic perspectives of the revolutionary workers' movement?
2. What role do science, technology, labor productivity and production play in the transition from capitalism to ecosocialism, also in an ecosocialist society after the transition?
3. Since the self-emancipation of the working class and other oppressed layers is central in the transition from capitalism to socialism, and therefore to ecosocialism, what do we think will motivate these social forces to see the necessity of ecosocialism? How does the ecological crisis affect the orientation of unions and their place in the class struggle? Beyond traditional kinds of demands and programs, are there other demands and programs that might supplement or perhaps supplant the traditional approach of unions?
4. How, if scaling back production is necessary, will ecosocialist strategy remain committed to meeting human needs? Or can we envision continued expansion and economic growth under ecosocialism, as the working classes and others in the industrialized nations have come to expect? If so, how does this differ from expansion and growth under capitalism? What will enable it to take place without an even greater destruction of the environment? If not, how do we ensure the generalized satisfaction of needs for all, including the equalization of living standards between the industrialized nations and the rest of the world?
5. What ideas do ecosocialists raise in the climate change movement? Are James Hansen's proposals (for example, advocacy of a "carbon tax" rather than "cap and trade") in some form useful for ecosocialists as a transitional demands, or are they simply an attempt to solve the ecological crisis within the context of capitalism? What is the relationship today between issues that can mobilize traditional kinds of mass struggles, such as hydrofracking or the Keystone XL pipeline, and proposals to promote what some might term "life-style" actions (what others refer to as "prefiguration") such as personally using fewer resources, boycotting GMO foods and buying organic, putting a priority on recycling, creating/promoting urban gardens, food coops, and similar institutions?
6. Related to #5: What kinds of cooperatives that can be built today might be able to teach us something about a post-capitalist world? What role, if any, should ecosocialists seek to play in these communities?

Ecosocialism: The Road Ahead, the Struggle at Hand

by **Steve Bloom**

I would like to suggest that one way to think about the answers to these questions might be as stones in an archway. One base of that arch rests in the capitalist present, the other in our ecosocialist future. And if we approach things in this way then perhaps our answer to question number 4 represents the keystone to that arch, the answer that supports the entire structure: "How, if scaling back production is necessary, will ecosocialist strategy remain committed to meeting human needs? Or can we envision

continued expansion and economic growth under ecosocialism, as the working classes and others in the industrialized nations have come to expect?”

In my judgment there should be no “if” in this question. Scaling back production is necessary—at least if we are speaking of the presently-industrialized nations, and probably if we are speaking of the planet taken as whole. There is no possibility for continued expansion and economic growth (if we consider the overall aggregate of what we produce) under ecosocialism in the industrial North. Indeed, there is not even the possibility of maintaining present levels of production and energy consumption here—though surely there will be a dramatic shift in the priorities of production, so that areas related to genuine human needs can be qualitatively increased even while the aggregate product is reduced. The fact that we even have this “if” in the questions that were generated is an indication of just how far the consciousness of those who would like to think that we are among “the most advanced” ideologically lags behind reality in this case.

The need to scale back energy use in particular, but also production more generally, in the “advanced” countries is indelibly engraved upon the earth today, not only by climate change but also by desertification, deforestation, ocean acidification, hydrofracking, mountain-top removal, the increased toxicity of air, water, and food supplies, and much more. Our choice is either to acknowledge this reality and plan for an ecosocialist future which entails reducing present expectations about and levels of consumption in the first world (in particular our consumption of energy) or we can bury our heads in the sand and pretend that we do not see the reality. The Marxist method, however, has never been in favor of burying our heads in the sand.

The rest of the present essay will, therefore, be based on the need to reduce production/consumption in the “economically developed” parts of the world as a fundamental premise. It is, of course, possible for someone to challenge this premise. But to be useful such a challenge needs to be based on a rigorous plan, showing how the implementation of easily-developed technology can reduce the ecological impact of humanity while still providing greater and greater production of material wealth. Otherwise we are proceeding based on blind faith that new technology will miraculously arise to solve the problems created by old technology. The danger that this blind faith will prove misplaced is too great, and the results far too disastrous if it turns out to be misplaced, for us to take such a risk.

This provides the context, then, in which we will attempt to at least sketch reasonable answers to other questions posed by the working group, including the subquestions in point 4: How, then, do we satisfy the needs of everyone, which includes bringing the vast majority of the world's population, which presently lives in dire poverty, up to a level that is compatible with the idea of “socialism”?

One key to understanding this will be to speak, as I do above, about “reducing production/consumption,” not about “reducing our standard of living.” The distinction between these two concepts is key in my judgment, and here we come to a second premise that underlies everything I will suggest in the present article: that a life spent in pursuit of things that do not require intensive energy consumption, a pursuit that will be made possible when we have more leisure time because we are not obsessed with more and faster technologically-driven consumer goods, represents a higher standard of living, not a lower one. The things we can actively pursue in this way include developing relationships with other human beings, music, poetry, art, literature, education, dance, a relationship with the natural world. It is simply a bourgeois prejudice that a “high standard of living” entails the greater and greater consumption of more and more material goods, even if it is also true that for the last century the Marxist movement has been trapped by the idea that socialism represents the fulfillment of this bourgeois prejudice.

I ask readers to consider: With all of the pursuit of material things that is so prevalent in our culture, do those who succeed in that pursuit find themselves happy and contented with their lives? If not, why not? What is missing from this life style that ecosocialism might be able to provide, precisely

by overcoming the present-day addiction to the constantly-increasing aspirations of techno-consumerism?

Once these two premises are stated, the answers to most of the other questions posed by the working group become obvious and inescapable:

* Our idea of socialism has to change. We must be able to provide enough for everyone in the world (while still reducing global energy consumption, including the consumption of fossil fuels to zero) by developing a collective consciousness that basic human needs entail a certain reasonable quantity, and no more, of those things which can only be produced with a substantial input of energy. Instead of focusing production in an ecosocialist society on these kinds of commodities, which capitalist enterprises stress because they can be easily sold in order to make a profit, our emphasis will shift to a far greater reliance on those things which human beings can create with our own hands, minds, and hearts, using tools that are less energy-intensive.

* This, in turn, requires a sea change in the way we think we will win the working class and other social forces to the idea of ecosocialism. In the past revolutionary Marxists relied largely on the premise that capitalism would, because of its periodic crises, fail to provide enough of the material things that people need, or feel they need, stimulating mass discontent and an active search for an alternative that could do so. Socialism was that alternative. By reorganizing society based on collective ownership we would resolve the social contradictions of capitalism that generate economic crises and “free up the productive forces.” This is what would impel a majority of the working class to look for socialist answers to their problems.

Another pathway to revolution has historically gone through political crises of credibility created by war, or dictatorship, or scandal, or similar phenomena. But these also tend to be linked to economic crisis—especially the question of dictatorship—and the general outlines of a revolutionary socialist solution to political crises was essentially the same as our solution to economic crisis.

It is probably still true that a mass reconsideration of present ideological assumptions will be stimulated by some combination of capitalist economic and political crisis (though the crisis of human survival, and of species survival more generally, brought about by our destruction of the ecosystem, also seems capable of deeply affecting mass ideology). The solution we propose, however, can no longer be centered on “freeing up the productive forces” through collective ownership in order to generate “an abundance” (that is, so much in the way of material goods that no one could reasonably want more of anything). Instead the goal we project must be to resolve the crisis in a way that is compatible with an ecologically sustainable level of economic activity. This means shifting the kinds of consumption patterns and demand for things more toward those that do not require substantial quantities of energy to produce, as suggested above.

Can this be done? I believe that it can, that working people and their allies can be convinced to struggle for more leisure, more time that they might devote to developing the human side of their lives rather than the consumer side—though it is obviously impossible to say for sure until we try. What we can say for sure is that if this turns out to be impossible then the looming ecological catastrophe will crash down upon humanity and cannot be avoided. The only choice we have, therefore, is to try.

* This relates, in an obvious way, to the questions raised about the union movement today. Back in the 19th century, Samuel Gompers, founder of the American Federation of Labor, explained the program of the trade union movement in one word: “More.” Marxists, too, have tended to understand the class struggle strictly in terms of what share of the goods and services produced in any society are retained by those who produce those goods and services, compared to what share is pocketed by the slaveholders, or feudal lords, or capitalists in the form of “surplus value.” In a capitalist society, the traditional role of the unions has been, as Gompers cogently summed up, to struggle for a greater share.

Today, however, it makes no sense to struggle for a greater share of production that will, if it continues, destroy the ability of the earth to sustain a human population. It is clear that the ruling classes of the world are incapable of resolving this dilemma, because they are completely dependent on the generation of profit which requires 1) a disregard of the costs entailed by the earth and 2) a continual expansion of production. But the working class can, through its unions, begin to demand a shift in the way production takes place, not simply a greater share of what is produced in an ordinary capitalist manner. This almost certainly means producing less by way of commodities for sale (and therefore profit for the capitalists but also a smaller total “social surplus product” that working people, too, can share in). But this reduction in the potential for consumption of commodities should be compensated for, as noted above, by giving people increased time to invest in other kinds of pursuits—including non-commodity production of things that can be used directly or shared with family and community. All of this could begin to provide a meaningful component of each individual's “standard of living.”

Here are some examples of things unions might begin to struggle for in contract negotiations, or even just to implement themselves, taken from a document titled “Programmatic Challenges of Ecosocialism” by me, Gene Warren, and Jessica LaBumbard, written for and submitted to Solidarity's national convention in 2013:

Corporate funding of union-sponsored (and controlled) food coops, urban farms, community gardens, community supported agriculture, and similar institutions with free memberships for union members and their families, reduced-rate memberships for others in the community;

Creation of free or low-cost child care and elder-care services/cooperatives;

Proposals for the conversion of every industry toward more ecological alternatives (pollution controls, use of alternative energy sources, production of goods and services that can reduce fossil fuel emissions and other forms of waste on a social level, etc.);

Reverse the traditional capitalist trend—also, until now, projected by us as the socialist trend—toward the substitution of dead labor (technology, generally dependent on fossil fuels) for living labor. Given the combined crises of unemployment and ecology the continuation of this trend is a social absurdity. We propose the employment of more workers, using an increase in human labor as a substitute for fossil fuel consumption wherever possible. This is most dramatically the case today in agricultural production but could also have a significant impact in construction and virtually all forms of manufacturing.

In light of the ecological crisis, and also just because it will allow workers to live a more human life less dominated by time-on-the-job, a collective social reduction in the work week is more important at this stage than an increase in wages for at least the upper tier of organized workers in the USA—especially if unions also begin to focus on the development of social institutions such as child care, food coops, etc. The labor movement should begin an active educational campaign explaining why this is so important and emphasizing its ecological necessity, implemented either through legislation or negotiated as part of a collective bargaining process in individual enterprises. Things that might not show up in a paycheck, but could make a big difference in how far that paycheck goes or in other measures of the quality of life, should be stressed more during contract negotiations as part of our effort to reverse the trend toward techno-dependent consumerism. This will require a sea change in the way unions tend to think about their priorities and their tasks.

* Historically, Marxists have seen the tendency of labor productivity to rise over time as an unadulterated positive, something that socialism would continue to advance. The fact is, however, that this rise in labor productivity (aside from a relatively small component that comes from increased skill and technique) is due overwhelmingly to increases in energy consumption combined with the use of machinery to replace human labor. It is this tendency toward an increase in energy consumption which has, today, become the primary factor driving climate change along with many other kinds of

ecological destruction. So the conclusion for us is inescapable, or should be: The historical tendency toward an increase in the productivity of labor, which was once a force that enabled increased leisure and security (at least for the aggregate of humanity even if this was shared in an extremely unequal way), has now turned into its opposite. It has become a force for ecological destruction, thereby threatening our very existence. We would be better off today, therefore, with a lower level of labor productivity in many industries—both from an ecological and, even, from a human point of view.

Let us consider a few examples: The food we eat is increasingly processed, packaged, tasteless, and lacking in nutrition—even harmful, generating epidemics of diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and cancer. There is a direct relationship between the increases in industrial food processing (using more machinery and energy, less human labor) and this deterioration in food quality. A transformed agricultural system which relied more on organics, local and smaller-scale production (including urban farming), would be more labor intensive but also more satisfying in terms of human needs.

Productivity in creation of consumer electronics has made each unit so “cheap” (in the market sense of that term) that it is more “efficient” to throw something away when it breaks down and buy another of the same kind rather than devote the human labor necessary to repair what is broken. This is a phenomenon which began to take hold in the last half of the 20th century and it’s a trend that contributes mightily to the ecological exhaustion of the earth. Capitalism cannot possibly create a culture of repair and reuse as an alternative, because it is driven by profit. Ecosocialism, however, will have to do so, even though this will be more “costly” in terms of labor productivity.

How many of the commodities we buy—from furniture to clothing to construction—have seen a deterioration in quality over the last century because the “cost of production” (that is, how much human labor is used up in making each unit) is the prevailing factor when production decisions are made? How much better will such items be in an ecosocialist society if we succeed in stressing the value of things individual humans, or collectives of humans, can make with their own hands, minds, and hearts, using tools that require less energy rather than more?

How useful would it be in urban communities to devote a single day each month to volunteer labor so we might clean up and repair public places—streets, parks, and other infrastructure? How much would the quality of urban life be improved by such a collective effort? How hard is it for a capitalist state to organize this kind of labor-intensive activity, when everything in everyone's life has been commodified? How much easier will it be for an ecosocialist community, where volunteer labor for the good of the community will have achieved the highest level of prestige, and where individuals will measure the results of their labor in something other than how much money they made that day?

I will assert, therefore, that a decrease in labor productivity can reasonably be projected as part of our ecosocialist vision so long as the labor which society then requires is felt to be meaningful and fulfilling in a human sense (non-alienated precisely because it is labor engaged using our own hands, minds, and hearts, making things for use by ourselves or others in our immediate community). Such labor will be seen as simply a part of life—the way a backyard gardener treats the labor necessary to grow tomatoes or other vegetables—not as an onerous burden. Our program for an ecosocialist world has to gamble on the possibility that individual human beings will make the choice to labor in this way if they are, in fact, given a free choice, not compelled to work by the whip of wage slavery. I remain optimistic enough about human nature to believe that this is a bet we will win. More importantly, just as with our new method for convincing the working class that it must fight for ecosocialism, if this is not a bet we can win then there is no alternative that will save our planet from destruction. It is, therefore, a perspective we have to pursue, a gamble we have to take.

* Related to the question of labor productivity is the one posed about science and technology. We can, reasonably, expect that the pursuit of scientific knowledge will be greatly enhanced in an ecosocialist world—both because there will be more people with more time to study science, engaging in this as their life vocation, but also because science will now be detached from the pursuit of products that can

be commercially exploited. It will be science for the sake of advancing human knowledge and understanding, full stop.

It is inevitable that a science of this type will produce even more rapid advances in knowledge and, therefore, in the potential for new technology. What technology will be actively pursued and put into use? What potential technologies will be set aside?

Our present system makes this choice based primarily on questions of profit. We rush to mass produce new technology that can help to generate increased profits for capitalist enterprises. There is, as we know, also a great deal of new technology that could reduce waste, eliminate pollution, and simply make life more comfortable for human beings which is not rushed into production because it cannot generate profits. Think about research which is, and that which is not, undertaken by drug companies to see another example of this dynamic at work.

In an ecosocialist world the relationship described in the last paragraph would be reversed. Our priority, probably our exclusive focus, will be on new technology that can help us to live a life that is more in tune with the planet that we inhabit and with the kinds of human pursuits we speak about above. We will set aside any and all new technologies that are inherently more polluting and/or ecologically unsustainable (including those that might increase the productivity of labor).

* All of this also suggests a dramatic change in our concept of what mechanisms we have to pursue in order for an ecosocialist transformation to take place. That change does not, in my judgment, require anything new in the traditional revolutionary Marxist call for mass insurrection leading to the overthrow of the present imperial-bourgeois state power, its replacement with an alternative state power based on the working class and other presently-oppressed social layers. But it does mean that between here and there we have to embrace any and all movements that might develop today to promote or facilitate individuals using fewer resources, boycotting GMO foods and buying organic, putting a priority on recycling, creating/promoting urban gardens and food coops, along with other kinds of cooperative enterprises that attempt to function “off the grid.”

Yes, we will continue to oppose all tendencies, and there are many such tendencies, which treat actions of this type as if they are sufficient in and of themselves. We insist that such individual and collective forms of alternative behavior can only be meaningful and useful in the context of a broader social struggle against the capitalist system and the capitalist state. But if we are able to develop that broader social struggle, such forms of individual and collective action—that begin to model an alternative lifestyle and inherently challenge the prerogatives of capital even if they do not directly confront the state power—should be actively embraced and encouraged. There are two reasons for this: 1) there will be a tendency for such initiatives, if they become successful even on their own terms, to find that they must confront the state in ways that are more traditionally political than their initial advocates had expected, thereby becoming a transitional form that can help to stimulate overtly political struggles, and 2) whether they end up in a confrontation with the bourgeois state or not, they begin to educate about the core idea noted above: A “higher” standard of living for everyone in the world can no longer be pursued through more and more material things that are energy-intensive and polluting both to produce and to consume. It has to be based on eco-friendly values and on eco-friendly production.

* It’s also essential to say a few words about bringing the less economically developed parts of the world up to a standard of living that is equal to that of the more economically developed. This remains both a moral and a practical imperative for ecosocialism.

First, it should be clear that if we are already pledged to reduce the level of energy consumption and production in the “first world” then we have substantially reduced the difficulty that exists in bringing the “third world” up to the same standard. One part of figuring the extent to which we must reduce in the industrialized nations is to determine a per-capita of energy consumption that can be

reasonably sustained on a global level, setting this as our target in North America, Europe, and Japan. If we can achieve that target we will then be able to increase the per capita energy consumption in Latin America, Asia, and Africa to the same level without going over what is sustainable on a global scale.

Second, there are certain immediate measures that an ecosocialist revolution in the industrialized nations would take that instantly remove obstacles to sustainable development in the global south. First among these measures would be the cancellation of all third world debt. How many nations could, for example, create a self-sustaining agriculture if they were freed from the necessity of producing for the global market in order to generate the cash they need to repay “development” loans? Quite a significant number, I believe.

Elimination of the market imperative in these nations should also mean a reversal of the historical trend toward wiping out traditional forms of subsistence agriculture, especially those practiced by indigenous peoples. We ought to consider this question without the first-world prejudice against such forms of production as inherently “backward.” They are not. Given the use of certain more modern techniques, smaller scale and more labor-intensive agriculture can in fact become quite productive. Indeed, as noted above, the introduction of such methods to enhance, or even replace, the “more advanced” industrial agriculture we practice today in the “economically advanced” parts of the world is something ecosocialists ought to be advocating.

Then, finally, we will obviously require a significant program of material and technical assistance that should flow from the presently industrialized nations to those which remain less developed economically. It is useful, I believe, to think of this as a kind of reparations that we will be paying to the rest of the world, compensation for the systematic theft of resources and labor (sometimes at gunpoint, sometimes through market mechanisms) by more powerful nations from the earliest era of capitalist expansion and development until today.

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I hope it will be obvious that the above perspective represents both a continuity with and a transformation of a traditional revolutionary Marxist understanding, as conceived during the 20th century. That is the right approach, conceptually, to this and to many other questions. The ecological crisis is new. It is something that only began to be recognized by human beings as a crisis during the last half of the 20th century, and only recognized as an acute and looming crisis in the last ten to twenty years. We cannot expect the theoretical tools developed by revolutionaries who lived before this time to be completely adequate if our goal is to respond to this new global reality. On the other hand there are many features of capitalism, how it functions and the obstacles that exist to social transformation, that remain unchanged since the days of the *Communist Manifesto*. On these questions we must look to the historical experience of the 19th and 20th century for the help and guidance it can offer.

This is as it should be, and as it ever will be for those who want to develop their Marxism as a living reality that has meaning for us today, not as a dogma derived from the past, while simultaneously rejecting a purely pragmatic approach which has also proved, over and over, to be inadequate.