

# System Change: Not Climate Change!

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# Capitalism—a system rigged for oil

Multinational bosses plan to keep pumping out more oil and gas—despite climate catastrophe. Sarah Bates looks at why we have to keep fossil fuels in the ground and why the industry is so central to how capitalism operates

here's hardly a resource more critical to modern capitalism than oil—the whole system is powered by it. From petrol-guzzling vehicles and plastics to wars that ravage the Middle East, oil has been big business for over 100 years.

Now the spotlight is on how fossil fuels drive the rapidly escalating climate crisis.

The root cause of climate change is 150 years of the industrial-scale burning of oil, coal and gas. This has heated up the global atmosphere by 1.5 degrees—and how much hotter it's going to get, nobody knows yet.

The discovery of oil in 1859 was a key turning point in matically reducing their use is key for tackling global capitalist development. At first oil didn't have many uses, but soon a handful of corporations had monopolised production and ruthlessly grew the industry.

They fueled the growth of the car, chemicals and other industries reliant on oil.

From the 1930s to 1950s, US bosses actively worked to sabotage alternatives. A cartel of oil and automobile companies bought up public transport in cities across the US, ripped up tram lines and replaced them with buses.

Transport remains the biggest consumer of oil—in Britain, for instance, 75 percent of oil goes on road and air transport.

But oil underpins a range of other sectors and com-

modities, including many we use in our everyday lives. They now include fertilisers and pesticides, detergents, paints and medicines, debit cards, shampoos and stationary.

As the oil industry fought for new markets for petrol, spin-off industries did the same for their products. Since the 1930s chemical industry bosses invested in coming up with a vast range of new plastics—and 99 percent of them derive from oil and gas production.

Not only are fossil fuels central to capitalism, they are a key driver of climate catastrophe.

Scientists have said for at least three decades that drawarming. As far back as the 1992 UN summit in Rio de Janeiro, they accepted that fossil fuels were behind the crisis that blew a hole in Earth's ozone layer.

#### **Planets**

But instead of cutting back, the industry is pouring billions of pounds into new oil rigs and power planets.

Oil firms claim that they're responding to the climate emergency by investing in initiatives such as solar energy or electric cars. But their efforts to finance wind, tidal and solar power are completely outmatched by the huge amounts of money they're pouring into traditional, dirty

## **Hurricane Capitalism**

Hurricane Ida hit the US at the end of a summer of fires, heatwaves, and floods. Eric Fretz writes from New York on the connection to climate change and capitalism.

gain and Again under capitalism, we have seen poorer people disproportionately hit by the deadly effects of events like cyclones and earthquakes, as natural disasters highlight existing unnatural inequalities. It is now obvious that not just the effects, but the causes of extreme weather are stemming from capitalism.

The recent IPCC report proved that higher air and sea temperatures caused by global warming have already led to more hurricanes, and will continue to do so. "In the past seventy years," Bill McKibben noted, "the United States has averaged three land-falling storms a year; Ida is the seventeenth in the past two years."

But warming also leads to a "rapid intensification" of storms. Ida turned into a hurricane in just six hours.

When Ida hit the Louisiana coast Sunday as a Category 4 hurricane with winds up to 150 mph, it was the second most powerful storm to hit the state in its recorded history.

#### **Devastation**

Over 1 million homes and businesses in Louisiana and Mississippi are without power, including the entire city of New Orleans, parts of which may remain without electricity for weeks.

Sewage pumping stations in New Orleans, which have no backup power, stopped working, leaving 441,000 people in 17 parishes with no clean drinking water, and no water to flush toilets. Another 329,000 people were under boil water advisories. However, it may be hard for many to boil water without electricity.

Added to this misery was a heat advisory which combined with humidity to reach real feel temperatures of over a hundred degrees

Tens of thousands of residents were left to themselves in figuring out how to evacuate, and even those with cars were at a standstill on choked highways.

In a chilling reminder of the horrors of Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department announced that "antilooting patrols" would be set up. The mayor then used the resulting arrests to justify a curfew and calling in the National Guard—not to rescue people or rebuild, but to patrol the streets.

As in Katrina, it is poor and black people who are most at risk of losing their homes—and their lives.

Ida came one year after Hurricane Laura, which brought widespread destruction to the mostly Black industrial area around Mossville, causing chemical fires and turning Lake Charles into a toxic soup. The displacement and continued housing shortage caused by Laura worsened the spread of Covid in the area.

The displacement caused by Ida in New Orleans could be even worse. Hospitals in Louisiana are already filled with over 2,400 patients with coronavirus. There were not enough empty beds in the state to evacuate patients from New Orleans hospitals. Staff in one hospital reported having to manually pump air into the lungs of intubated Covid patients as they moved them to a floor with a working generator.



#### Aftermath

After passing through New Orleans, Ida was still a major storm, causing deadly flooding from the Louisiana coast to Tennessee and up the east coast. On the way it sparked tornadoes in three states, and killed close to 50 people in the Northeast. In New York City a state of emergency was called after a new record rainfall (although many poorly paid essential workers braved the storm). A majority of those killed by the storm in NYC, many of them immigrants, were drowned in illegally rented basement apartments.

The IPCC report predicted that heavy rains and flooding is slated to increase in the Northeast for years, while the West of the US will face a related increase in droughts and fires.

Hurricane Katrina warned us not only of extreme weather, but of local and federal negligence and the deadly effects of racism. After Katrina, the levees in a gentrifying New Orleans were improved, and thankfully withstood Hurricane Ida. But, as one New Orleans doctor noted, "the system is less ambitious than the one Louisianans lobbied for after Katrina, and the protection it offers grows weaker every day, as the wetlands that buffer the city from the Gulf of Mexico get wetter." Over-all, the Katrina disaster was used to push privatization and displacement, not improvement in the social

infrastructure. Economic inequality continued to rise along with the sea levels; racism and fossil fuel emissions continued to grow.

Capitalism is causing this climate chaos, as well as the inequality which means black and poor people, who contribute less to climate change, pay the highest price. **The Fight Ahead** 

The UNITE HERE union put out a statement on Hurricane Ida that rightly concluded "Climate justice is an economic and racial justice issue, and as a labor movement we know how to bring people together in moments of crisis, and we know how to build a movement that can accomplish extraordinary change... together we must act—not just to provide relief but to tackle the underlying causes of climate change that put people at the economic margins worldwide in the greatest jeopardy."

We must all build a large and militant climate movement, and involve the unions in a way that puts these words into action.

We must demand that massive "infrastructure" spending be targeted, not at assisting the profits of American business, but at protecting the most vulnerable from what are now the inevitable effects of climate change.

Crucially, we must also fight to stop further carbon emissions, which are worsening these effects and driving us to catastrophe, and rebuild in a just, ecologically sustainable way. But this means taking on all the priorities of capitalism and fighting for a different system based on human needs and solidarity.

## Profit, not People is Destroying the Climate

he undeniable evidence of climate change from the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, illustrated by the climate catastrophes of 2021, cannot be ignored by any reasonable person.

The argument is what to do about it. Most sections of the mainstream media blame humanity as a whole for what is happening and advise individual actions.

All such analysis avoid a central question—one raised by the revolutionary Vladimir Lenin as long ago as 1894.

Faced with the seeming "inevitability" of certain political outcomes, he asked "exactly what social economic formation gives the process its content, exactly what class determines this necessity."

Climate chaos flows from the capitalist system that subordinates humanity and the rest of nature to the demands of profit-making. It is the ruling class who will fight to the death to defend this system.

The blame for where we are now lies directly with the 100 fossil fuel companies that have been responsible for 71 percent of global emissions since 1988. And governments across the world have lined up to defend such corporations and the wider system that is pushing towards extinction.

The Paris Agreement, signed in 2015, was meant to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Since then, money being invested in fossil fuels has increased.

Despite paying lip service to the problem, proposals from the Biden administration come nowhere near what is needed to curb emissions, because they are limited to working within the markets and not threatening profits. Meanwhile, the already grossly inadequate measures in the \$3.1 billion infrastructure

package are being blocked in Congress by fossil fuel company lobbying. The US government is still approving new drilling and pipelines.

Yet we are told to help save the environment by buying green products, or personal recycling. Such messages are a deliberate avoidance of the radical action that's really necessary.

Blaming ordinary people creates a race to the bottom. People living in the Global South where infrastructure is poor are already blamed for cooking on open fires.

These people aren't to blame, but they are more likely to pay the price of the climate effects. Ordinary people are not the cause of the climate emergency. Instead, people in revolt are the solution.

It will take a sustained mass movement, and an assault on capitalist priorities to win the change we need. In facing the terrible future of fire, flood and drought, there is a danger of fatalism—the idea that all of this is an accomplished fact.

It is indeed too late to avoid many damaging climate effects. But it is not too late to stop the system driving us to destruction.

A good beginning is to join the September protests by Extinction Rebellion and Friday's for Future 9/24 youth Climate Strike. These should be seen as building blocks larger mobilizations bringing together broader forces.

In November the Cop26 gathering in Glasgow will see massive mobilization against the politicians and corporations who are enemies of a sustainable future.

We need to combine such mobilizations with all the other working class battles to resist and defeat the system that has created climate horror.

### From civil resistance to revolution

What will it take to stop runaway Climate Change? Sue Caldwell examines Erica Chenoweth's ideas of non-violent civil disobedience popular with Extinction Rebellion. Adapted from an article in *Socialist Review*.

he principle of "non-violent civil disobedi-ence" is central to the philosophy of XR, which draws its inspiration from several sources including Martin Luther King and Gandhi. Less well known, but frequently quoted, is the work of US academic Erica Chenoweth, in particular a book she coauthored with Maria Stephan called Why Civil Resistance Works.

**Actively participating** 

The book was published at the end of 2011, but for several years little was known about their research outside academia. In 2017 the Guardian published an opinion piece by Chenoweth in response to the election of Donald Trump and the huge Women's March on Washington. The headline was "It may only take 3.5% of the population to topple a dictator — with civil resistance". This figure has since been widely quoted at XR events and by journalists reporting on them.

Following the April International Rebellion the BBC ran a feature headed "The 3.5% rule: how a small minority can change the world", claiming that Chenoweth had shown "it takes around 3.5% of the population actively participating in the protests to ensure serious political change". At number two in the list of principles and values on the XR website is "We set our vision on what is necessary — mobilizing 3.5% of the population to achieve system change."

This is an ambitious aim; it would mean actively engaging over two million people in the UK for an extended period of time (or 11.5 million in the US). But the most astonishing thing about the 3.5 percent figure is the lack of published evi-

dence for it. It does not appear in Why Civil Resistance Works, although Chenoweth claims in a 2013 TED talk — without providing any further reference — that the data in the book justifies the claim. The popularizing of the figure is representative of the way that Chenoweth's research has been taken up in a sometimes misleading form by supporters and detractors alike.

Perhaps more important than pinpointing an exact figure is understanding the strategies that can most effectively mobilize large numbers. Here there is much of interest in the book — though often for what it does not say as much as for what it does.

Chenoweth and Stephan collected data on 323 mass actions between 1900 and 2006, dividing them into "violent" and "non-violent" categories. They concluded that non-violent civil resistance campaigns were around twice as likely to succeed as violent ones. XR co-founder Roger Hallam is explicit about the influence of this research on the group. In May 2019 he wrote, "Drawing on the groundbreaking research of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan...we came to the conclusion that the only way to overcome entrenched political power is through extensive campaigns of large-scale nonviolent direct action."

Such references appear repeatedly in interviews involving key figures in XR, as well as from individual activists on the ground during many of the wonderful actions that have been taking place in major cities around the world. So how applicable is the research to these sorts of actions?

First, it is important to say that for Chenoweth and Stephan violence means literally taking up arms against a regime. It does not mean breaking a few windows, lashing out in self-defense, resisting arrest, shouting and swearing or even occasional violent acts of revenge. In fact, they surprisingly characterize the first Palestinian Intifada of 1987-8 as non-violent because, even though it involved some stone throwing, its primary methods were demonstrations, strikes and boycotts.

Second, only three types of resistance campaigns were considered: those whose aims were to resist occupation, to achieve secession or to overthrow a regime. In the latter case this does not necessarily entail any fundamental change in the economic system — the color revolutions in Eastern Europe and the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines are held up as successful examples. There are no studies of single-issue campaigns within parliamentary democracies, although Chenoweth has subsequently hinted that some aspects of her research may be transferable.

#### More diverse

Chenoweth and Stephan identify some key features of non-violent campaigns that make them more likely to succeed. First, they enable a larger and more diverse section of the population to participate. Second, they are more likely to elicit "loyalty shifts" within the regime and its supporters, particularly the security forces. Third, a wider participation means a wider variety of tactics; and finally that they tend to be more resilient when faced with repression or periods of inactivity.

The recent climate rebellions and school strikes have seen an explosion of inventive methods for capturing attention, from humorous placards to pink boats in the middle of streets to the gluing and "locking on"

of people to buildings and vehicles. These can be seen as examples of "strategic creativity and innovations" that flow from mass non-violent protests. It would be completely wrong for socialists to counterpose more traditional forms of struggle such as demonstrations and strikes. However, it is equally wrong to claim, as some do, that the research shows that "old" methods don't work.

Chenoweth recognizes that general strikes are an effective way of mobilizing large numbers of people. Elsewhere she refers to strikes in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 as "critical". One of the most successful events at the recent London Rebellion was an "A to B" march — the Grief March that saw tens of thousands mobilized at very short notice.

XR is particularly good at thinking about the resilience of the movement. Food and entertainment are a key part of its actions, and the "regenerative culture" of its groups allows time for rebels to reflect and engage in lower level activities before preparing for the next big event. This resonates with what Chenoweth and Stephan call "community-based mobilizing structures" that sustain campaigns over the long haul.

In periods of revolutionary upheaval, workers' councils often play a similar role, in a way that can lead to a direct challenge for power. Unfortunately, in their case study of the Iranian Revolution that toppled the Shah in 1979, the authors refer to the network of mosques that helped Khomeini come to power, but not to the elected strike committees or shoras that took over the factories and could have provided the basis for an alternative outcome.

This example highlights a fundamental flaw in the book for anyone looking to bring about genuine and lasting system change. The measure of success is the extent to which a stable parliamentary democracy has been established. Alternative forms of government, such as that established after the Russian Revolution in 1917, are written off as authoritarian and dictatorial. There is little under-

standing of the political battle for leadership that takes place during what Chenoweth and Stephan call the revolutionary upheavals. This is not a battle between violent and nonviolent methods, but between those whose aim is to reform capitalism on the one hand, and revolutionaries on the other.

> Both methods will inevitably use some form of violence at some point, as the Hong Kong protests for seemingly minor reforms are demonstrating. Revolutionaries have to be prepared to confront the forces of the state through the disciplined use of force where necessary, in order to replace the organs of class rule with democratic workers' organizations. This is only possible with the mass participation of workers, which is why socialists spend their time building solidarity with all forms of struggle against the system, not in armed training camps. This approach is not compatible with the liberal reformism that characterizes the analysis in the book.

The research in Why Civil Resistance Works was supported in large part by the International Centre for Non-Violent Conflict (ICNC), for whom Stephan worked before going on to the US Department of State. The ICNC was co-founded by Jack DuVall, an officer in the US Air Force who has worked within US federal administration and written speeches for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. The other ICNC co-founder is Peter Ackerman, a wealthy investment banker who has been involved in various tax scandals involving millions of dollars, and has "advised pro-democracy activists on how to topple dictators." DuVall and Ackerman are top of the list of thanks by both authors. None of this negates the validity of the research, but it should make us wary of some of the interpretations.

#### **Cross-class alliance**

For example, Chenoweth credits the participation of a diverse range of "ages, classes, occupations and ideologies" with making splits within the ruling regime more likely. Her vision is of a cross-class alliance that can herald a softer capitalism. But all

classes do not have the same interests in society; it is workers and the poor who suffer most and their struggles must never be subordinated to keeping sections of the elite onside, which is often what discussions about violence come down to.

To avert a climate catastrophe, we need a bigger vision than a softer capitalism. We need to challenge the profit motive of capitalism and its reliance on fossil fuels. In the XR handbook This Is Not A Drill, Hallam says, "labor strikes are so effective against companies and...closing down a capital city is so effective against governments." But it is wrong to make such a distinction political and economic strikes by workers will be at the heart of any direct challenge to the system, alongside mass protests.

That will involve finding ways to connect the verve and inventiveness of the rebellions and school strikes to the power that workers have when they mobilize on a mass scale. The temporary coalition around the People's Climate March, the 2019 climate strike, and the involvement of trade unionists in the International Rebellion were good starts. Concern about the environment has only grown since then, but the movement will have to be re-built after the Covid break. The Black Lives Matter explosion in the US shows this can be done, if activists don't collapse behind Biden's inadequate proposals.

It will be interesting to see whether Chenoweth's next book engages more directly with these types of struggles. In any case socialists should throw themselves into the new movements and engage in the important debates taking place.

# Can Marxism Help Save the Planet?

Alistair Farrow looks briefly at the ideas of Marx and Engels on humankind's relation to nature, and the class forces that can take on capitalism.

Interaction between humans and nature has fundamentally shaped the world we live in.

It's often said that Marxists treat environmental politics as secondary to class politics.

Yet the revolutionaries Karl Marx and Frederick Engels understood that the world around us reacts to human activity, and impacts human life as well.

Another charge levelled against Marxists is that they see the natural world as subordinate to the needs of humanity. This couldn't be further from the truth.

The basis of the charge lies in the crass oversimplifications that were at the heart of Stalinist "philosophy." This held that ironclad laws governed everything in nature.

Engels developed ideas that were far more nuanced. He wrote, "Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel out the first."

Marx and Engels could not have known the devastating impact that climate change would have on life on them against each other.

Earth. Yet they situated humanity's relationship with the planet within a philosophical and scientific framework that sees society as shaped by historical processes rather than absolute values.

Marx and Engels were deeply interested in the work of their contemporary Charles Darwin. They saw his ideas about changes in species as being similar to the way they understood the development of human societies.

#### Constant

The idea of constant change is at the heart of both theoretical frameworks. This stood in contrast to conservative ways of understanding the environment that see nature as static.

One bourgeois ideological understanding of nature portrays it as a constant, unsullied thing that exists independently of humanity.

It is to be enjoyed or exploited, not interacted with in a dynamic way—even if this is the real relationship.

Marx and Engels saw human society as riven with contradictions and conflict. These contradictions are everywhere.

For instance, there is no profit to be made on a dead planet. Yet capitalists continue to plunder and burn fossil fuels because they are gripped in a system of competition that pits them against each other. If BP got rid of its carbon-based business it would go to the wall as its competitors cashed in.

So the death-march of environmental destruction tramps on. Similar contradictions are found everywhere in capitalist society.

Marx identified the working class as the force that can resolve these contradictions.

Workers create value in the system and are robbed of it almost simultaneously. This puts them in a uniquely powerful position.

In Capital's third volume, Marx argued that capitalism creates "an irreparable rift in the independent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself."

This means that the savage social processes that capitalism has unleashed separates humans from nature. These processes subordinate both the natural world and humans' interaction with it to the drive for profit.

Capitalism reduces the natural world to something which is a source of either profit or bucolic fantasy.

The fight to limit the effects of climate change must be linked to the fight against capitalism. Otherwise the drive to profit will create yet more "unforeseen effects" that ravage the planet, and the people that create those profits too.



# Capitalism: Rigged for Oil

(Continued from page 1)

energy expansion.

In 2018, the world's top 24 oil firms invested £2.6 billion in low carbon energy technology. To put that into context, the International Energy Agency says the oil industry generates more than £552 billion of investible cash each year.

The solution to the climate crisis will require international cooperation, decarbonization of the economy and unprecedented infrastructure projects among other radical changes.

But in some ways, the solution is incredibly simple.

Carbon dioxide is the biggest greenhouse gas, and it's caused by burning fossil fuels.

To try and slow down global warming, it is necessary to stop burning all fossil fuels. And to do that, it would require the rich minority at the top of society to take a long-term view on the climate crisis.

But capitalism is driven forward by competition among rival corporations. If bosses didn't try to maximise profits, they would be driven out of business and replaced by another company.

This means the short-term drive for profits comes ahead of planet and people. So the problem is not just the fat cats who sit in the boardrooms or the politicians who protect their wealth and power.

It's the entire system that to blame—and the oil and fossil production are central to it.

Fighting for a greener version of capitalism doesn't confront the social, economic and political forces behind it.

It's not eating hamburgers or flying abroad for a holiday that powers the utter devastation seen by the floods in Jakarta, cyclone Idai in southern Africa or the bushfires in Australia. These events are a result of a climate catastrophe powered by a system built in the interests of the billionaires.

Time is running out to take meaningful action for the future of the planet. Before capitalism ruins it, we should burn down the system and cre-

ate a new socialist society from the ashes.

### Oil demand grows even though the planet burns

If oil extraction continues at the same pace, the results will be disastrous. If it increases, the consequences are unfathomable.

Yet demand for oil is rising and the development of renewable energy doesn't come anywhere close to matching capitalism's need for petrol.

Global demand for oil will continue to grow until 2030, according to the International Energy Agency.

That's the year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said was the last opportunity to prevent the worst-case scenario for the planet.

The IPCC said that oil and gas production needs to fall by about 20 percent by 2030 and by about 55 percent by 2050 to stop the critical above 1.5 degree level.

But the US was pumping 17.8 million barrels a day in November 2019—up from an average of 15.5 million the previous year. ExxonMobil is planning to pump 25 percent more oil and gas in 2025 than in 2017. Rising anger over climate change is pushing the fossil fuel firms to appear as though they are changing.

At a shareholders meeting in May 2019, over 99 percent of BP shareholders voted in a favor of a resolution by the Climate Action 100+ group. It called on the firm to make greater disclosures on its emissions and show how investments agree with the Paris climate agreements.

But bosses were quick to point out that any changes wouldn't be hurting their bottom line.

BP chairman Helge Lund said, "My mission is to see BP advancing the transition while remaining an attractive investment proposition."

Firms are also grabbing new opportunities to build fracking or tar sands operations. Tar sands is extracted through "strip mining", where everything on the surface is removed to get to the oil. It releases even more emissions than other types of mining.

Commercial priorities are reflected in government policy, committed to managing capitalism.

So Liberal Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is brutal in expanding the exploitation of Canada's dirty tar sand oil. US President Biden has backed Trump's approval of the Line 3 Pipeline bringing this oil through the US, despite massive local opposition. The pipeline would carry the carbon equivalent of 50 new coal-fired power plants.

Early in the pandemic, crude oil prices fell dramatically. The government could have used this opportunity to buy up oil firms and wind them down, but moved to save them. This August, as oil and gasoline prices were rising, Biden called on the OPEC countries to *raise* their output of oil even more than the 400,000 barrels a day increase they planned.

Biden's plea for more oil came literally days after the IPCC report that concluded immediate reductions in burning fossil fuels were necessary.

The oil needs to be left in the soil, and the coal in the hole. This means stopping a system that can not stop itself from destroying the world.

### More Reading on Climate Change & Capitalism

Martin Epstein, Ian Angus, et al. System Change not Climate Change: A Revolutionary Response to Environmental Crisis, Bookmarks, 2019.

Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate.

John Bellamy Foster, Marx's Ecology and Ecology Against Capitalism.

Johnathan Neale, Fight the Fire theecologist.org/fight-the-fire

See also articles in www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net

marx21us.org/category/ environment An international socialist conference after COP26

The revolutionary

alternative to

capitalism's 😭

climate disaster



Take part on Zoom. This online conference, the weekend after COP26 and the protests, will bring activists together to hear from revolutionary socialists across the world and discuss the socialist answer to environmental disaster. More Info: https://www.facebook.com/events/416890682832122



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