

Building an Organic Left

by John Scull

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In describing the Rebuilding the Left conference, Rosenfeld and Gianola mention that there was limited attendance from "communities of colour, the environmental movement and the trade-union movement and youth". This is unfortunate in view of the goal "to develop a serious, inclusive, non-sectarian and green anti-capitalist Left." For Sam Gindin, "environmental pressures" are an issue for Third World countries, but not, apparently, for Canada. Himani Bannerji and David McNally don't mention the environment at all.

None of these writers mention the millions of people for whom the environmental movement sometimes claims to speak and who could not possibly have been at the conference. This group includes people of all colours, all cultures, both genders, and all sexual orientations and social classes -- our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Capitalism is pillaging and poisoning the world and we can be almost certain that our descendants and the descendents of the more-than-human beings with which we share the planet will be poorer and less healthy than we are, yet their interests do not seem to be of interest to the new left.

If the Left is to get beyond narrow self-interest and actually address the destruction being wrought by international capitalism, it will need to join the environmental movement in speaking for the future and for the non-human life that supports all of us. The world of seemingly unlimited resources in which Marx lived and in which the Left evolved no longer exists -- we now live on a small crowded planet with depleted oceans, vanishing forests, poisoned water, and a deteriorating atmosphere. Capitalist greed is destroying our home and this has drastically changed the challenges the left must address if it is not to fade into irrelevance.

When environmentalists in my home province of British Columbia try to protect old-growth forest, they are often opposed by both the logging corporations and by the unions representing the loggers. The union is concerned for its members but does not seem to share the concern of many environmentalists for its members' children or for the fishers, tourism operators, First Nations, and others whose livelihoods also depend on the health of the forest. Auto workers building SUVs, chemical workers making pesticides, nuclear workers, miners, and many others become allies of their capitalist employers when someone suggests their industry is a threat to present or future public health or welfare.

This attitude is understandable -- if an industry is shut down or curtailed, the workers will be the first to suffer, and a union must look out for the interests of its members. Capital can move elsewhere, leaving behind both a devastated environment and massive unemployment. Environmentalists often see the workers as enemies, not realizing that both the workers and the environment share the role as victims of unrestrained capitalism.

This conflict between the left and the environmental movement serves the interests of capitalism, which survives by exploiting both workers and the planet -- both the present and the future. By dividing us against each other, world capitalism insures its continued hegemony. Both environmentalism and the left are anti-capitalist movements yet they are often on opposite sides of disputes. Can we pull ourselves together and look at some strategies and policies that could unite us? It is going to take a great deal of respectful dialogue and creative thinking to bring these anti-capitalist movements together. Can those concerned for environmental, labour, social justice, and diversity interests find common cause? We must. While our world views seem far apart, we have much in common. Perhaps we can meet on this common ground and begin to work together to deal with our differences.

Common Ground

Methods and Tactics. Contemporary capitalism depends on growth, and for growth it depends on consumers. When we buy a newspaper or don't bother to recycle we are destroying forests as surely as the loggers and their corporate employers. When we drive a car instead of using public transit we are contributing to both the oil corporations and to global warming. Retail sales, usually considered as an index of economic "health", is a measure of how quickly we are, together, depleting the world's resources. The consumer boycott is an activist tool which has historically been used to great effect by the labour movement, the environmental movement, and campaigns for international social justice. It is a nonviolent tactic involving non-consumption so it can be used in both social justice and environmental justice struggles without creating conflict between the two. Yet when some British Columbia environmentalists supported the boycott of certain forest products by European Greenpeace groups, they were anathematized by industry, labour, and the BC NDP as "traitors". If we worked together, this kind of boycott could be a way for environmentalists and labour to be mutually supportive -- sustainable forestry means more long-term jobs.

Social Justice. Whether we want to or not, limits on resources will force us towards an ecological economy. Often the animosity of workers towards environmentalists amounts to shooting the messenger. Often the animosity of environmentalists towards workers confuses necessity and choice. As resources are depleted and the economy of pillage contracts, we will need to look at issues of social justice in a different way. At present, the costs of restructuring are paid by the workers in particular industries or communities. Environmental racism is a reality. When we work to stop ecologically destructive practices, we need to be sure that the costs are not unfairly born by the workers in a particular industry, the residents of a particular region, poor people, or people of colour. As the economy contracts we need to make sure the costs are distributed fairly. Urban environmentalists have often been insensitive to the economic needs of rural communities.

Efficiency, not Growth. We are faced with a future which will almost certainly include a contracting industrial economy. If the Right remains in control, this will lead to continued unemployment and community disruption and continued complaints that environmentalism, and not the deteriorating environment, is the problem. Society needs to move to a place where the goal is efficiency of resource use, not increased production and consumption. The Left and environmentalists could be advocating policies appropriate to the current situation -- a shorter work week, earlier retirement, improved education and maternity/paternity benefits, improved recreational facilities, creation of parks, development of clean industries. A Left-Green economic policy will be one which simultaneously lowers resource consumption and increases social justice -- the very opposite of the neo-liberal doctrine that increased growth and consumption will magically lead to social justice.

Health. Workplace health is closely related to environmental health, so this is another area where environmentalists and the Left can come together now. The first victims of pollution are usually the workers, the second group of victims are the workers' spouses and children who live nearby. In the long run, we are all victims. There are changes in labour and environmental legislation that could build solidarity rather than increase divisions. Effective whistle-blower legislation, for both safety and environmental concerns, is one area. Union recognition of environmentalist picket lines would be another. Legal protection for environmentalists who refuse to cross union picket lines is yet another. We are all in the same struggle and we need to advocate policies that bring us together, not those that separate us.

Allies

Environmentalists and leftists are natural allies -- they are both motivated by concerns that go beyond narrow self-interest. They share a commitment to community-based grassroots activism and to non-violence. The people and the non-human environment have a common enemy -- international capitalism. When we consider the welfare of future generations, it is clear that today's environmental injustice is tomorrow's social injustice. Under the present system, as the environment degrades

inequities will increase. If the Left is to continue to have any relevance and if the environmental movement is to translate its massive public support into political and social power, we need a dialogue that will bring us together. We need to work towards a movement that validates the quip that environmentalists are like watermelons, green on the outside and red on the inside. I saw little evidence for this in the articles about rebuilding the left. It will not be easy to come together and find common cause, but it is a task we must accomplish.