

The Earth Charter: A Manifesto for the 21st Century

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Whether they are addressed to social issues or environmental concerns, anti-capitalist movements need a positive vision of the future as well as criticism of the *status quo*. If we are to build solidarity among the many different anti-capitalist causes, we need both a critique and a positive mission shared by Reds and Greens; people of First World, Third World, and Fourth world societies; men and women, and members of both mainstream and minority groups in all societies. The Earth Charter may provide this shared positive vision.

In the last issue CD asked, "Why is the environmental movement reformist?" The question contains no hint that the environmental movement might include a positive and potentially revolutionary agenda of the future. Implicit in the question is the assumption that the environmental movement is not anti-capitalist and does not embody a radical critique of the *status quo*. Fortunately for the quality of the discussion, the three respondents went beyond the limitations of the question.

Laurie E. Adkins saw the environmental critique as being broader than, but including, a critique of capitalism. She pointed out that the environmental movement is part of the larger counter-hegemonic discourse which includes opposition to capitalism, "patriarchy, homophobia, racism, anthropocentrism and scientism." She pointed out that one barrier to a united anti-capitalist movement is that "the socialist Left in Canada has been peculiarly resistant to integrating the insights and alternatives provided by radical ecology."

Keith Stewart wrote directly about Red-Green unity when he pointed out how the support of organized labour was critical for Canada's signing of the Kyoto Protocol. The campaign for Kyoto succeeded because it was endorsed by an alliance of the kind I advocated in an earlier article (CD, Vol 35, #3, pp. 9-10). Stewart rightly pointed out that the environmental movement is seen by capitalists

themselves as an anti-capitalist movement. The opposition to Kyoto "was a comprehensive coalition of Canada's capitalist class."

Wharnock correctly pointed out that the green political movement is usually left of centrist and social democratic parties, but he is probably incorrect in his assertion that "the green movement is primarily a First World phenomenon." There are active environmental NGOs and green political movements in many developing countries but, like labour unions, women's groups, and other progressive political and civil society organizations, they are often suppressed and persecuted by international business interests and authoritarian governments. Environmental concern is a major issue in the political and cultural discourse of most First Nations.

The environmental movement has reformist roots in the sense that it has grown out of struggles over specific issues. However, the movement has also developed a more general analysis of the causes of environmental destruction. Environmentalism arose in reaction to the destruction of wilderness, depletion of natural resources, and pollution of the environment by the forces of economic "development." Similarly, socialism and the labour movement grew out of specific abuses that accompanied the industrial revolution.

Alternative conceptions of our relationship to the natural world, usually described as the "ecology" movement, have gone far beyond protest environmentalism. While it comes in different forms such as deep ecology, social ecology, ecopsychology, and spiritual ecology, most ecologists share a systemic worldview. They see humans as part of the natural world, everything as interconnected in a web of life, the future as a cause for concern, and individual consciousness and behaviour as connected to collective economic and political experiences and action.

In 1987 Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Labour Party prime minister of Norway, headed the UN World Commission on Environment and Development which first articulated, on a global scale, the complete interdependence of economic and ecological issues. The commission identified the need for a policy giving weight to both ecological and social justice concerns.

The drafting of an Earth Charter embodying this interconnectedness was on the agenda for the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, but like many good ideas at that summit, it did not survive the assault by forces supporting the corporate agenda. Frustration with the lack of significant outcomes from the first Earth Summit led to a proposal to create an Earth Charter independently of the UN and national governments.

With financial support from the Netherlands government, Maurice Strong and Mikhail Gorbachev created and led the Earth Charter Commission in a worldwide consultation process that resulted in the current version of the Earth Charter, launched in 2000. The consultation process included scientists, scholars, religious leaders, political leaders, and thousands of civil society organizations. It identified and gave voice to a huge global constituency for ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, and peace. The interdependence of these issues and of all the world's ecosystems and peoples is central to the Earth Charter.

A worldwide ethical vision for peace, nonviolence, democracy, economic justice, social justice, and ecological integrity sounds like a nice idea, but it may seem overly idealistic and irrelevant to the many immediate ecological, economic, and military crises facing the planet. The founders of the Earth Charter Commission, however, do not seem to be impractical dreamers. Maurice Strong, diplomat and former energy CEO, Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the USSR, and Ruud Lubbers, former prime minister of the Netherlands can hardly be accused of being naïve about the practical world of international capitalism, diplomacy, bureaucracy, Marxism, economics, or electoral politics.

Following the 2000 launch of the current version of the Earth Charter, the goal was to have it endorsed by the world's governments meeting for the second Earth Summit at Johannesburg in 2002. The Earth Charter was included in the first draft of the Johannesburg Declaration. South African president President Thabo Mbeki described the Earth Charter as a significant expression of "human solidarity." Speeches in support of the Earth Charter were also made by representatives from Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Jordan, Mexico, Netherlands, Niger, and Romania. The

conference then went into closed sessions and again the Earth Charter was not included in the final version of the Johannesburg Declaration. As a consolation prize, it was made an educational partner of UNESCO.

The current Earth Charter Initiative took a new direction after the disappointment of the second Earth Summit at Johannesburg. It became clear, ten years after the Rio disappointment, that meetings of government representatives are still controlled by international corporate interests, not the alternative ethical agenda provided by the Earth Charter. Rather than continuing to make presentations to international government bodies, the Earth Charter Initiative has become an effort to build support for a "people's treaty" among civil society and political movements around the world. It is a manifesto for a world in which hegemony moves from government and capitalism to a balance with community and civil society. The vision of the Earth Charter includes the Red-Green alliance in a larger coalition committed to human rights, sustainability, peace, democracy, and ecological integrity.

Its supporters see the Earth Charter as a set of principles which all the progressive people in the world can join together in supporting. The Earth Charter recognizes the complexity of inter-connected global systems and the continuing need for negotiation, balance, and problem-solving, but it also provides a vision of a future world in which we would like to live. By providing a shared vision, the Earth Charter makes possible a global coalition of progressive counter-hegemonic forces.

The Earth Charter Initiative, with headquarters in Costa Rica, is currently pursuing three goals: support community leaders of Earth Charter activities, support education about sustainable development, and encourage endorsement and implementation of the Earth Charter. Their website at www.earthcharter.org provides a clearinghouse of materials, news, and ideas and a network for the worldwide Earth Charter campaign. There is no intention to create a new, separate Earth Charter organization. Instead, the goal is to encourage all civil society and government organizations to incorporate the Earth Charter into their operations, decision-making, and advocacy.

By early 2003, the Earth Charter had been translated into 27 languages. More than 2,000 civil society organizations, 1,000 governments, and a number of businesses have endorsed its principles. Fifty-four countries have formed Earth Charter national committees. It has been endorsed by more than 75 organizations in Canada and there are a number of active local initiatives but there is no national committee in Canada yet.

The Earth Charter provides an opportunity for all of us on the left, in the green movement, in both rich and poor nations, young and old, and minorities and majorities, to unite behind a common vision for the future. The Earth Charter, by recognizing how we are interconnected and interdependent, can break down many of the barriers dividing resistance movements from each other. I invite CD readers to consider the Earth Charter, share it with the organizations to which you belong, and endorse it as a new revolutionary manifesto for the 21st century.