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ENVIRONMENT CRISIS- CAN CAPITALISM SOLVE IT?

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Dr. Paul Ehrlich's message to Australia is simple but shattering: the present world population of 3.7 billion is doubling every 35 years. The resources of the planet are finite and are being rapidly consumed. To simply maintain the present standard of living in the world therefore foodstuffs must increase proportionate to population growth, i.e. also double in 35 years.

One example: fish provides an invaluable source of high quality protein food; present harvest of fish is 60 million metric tons a year; marine biologists place world fish resources at between 100 and 200 million metric tons; at the conservative limit, they will be exhausted in less than 35 years, at the upper, in less than 70.

In answer to those who say the population explosion is a problem of only the under-developed countries, he points out that in the "over-developed" countries such as the U.S. and Australia, a newly-born child will consume as much as 50 times the amount of the world's resources consumed by a child born in India, and poses a much greater threat to the world's finite resources.

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The most serious problems relating to the use of resources is our ignorance of the effects of increasing power consumption on the thermal balance of the globe. The carbon Dioxide concentration in the atmosphere is rising, and so is the temperature. The changes do not correspond quantitatively, so we cannot yet be certain how far the temperature rise has been balanced by a greater reflection of heat from the sun caused by dust in the atmosphere.

A drop of three degrees in the average global temperature may be enough to bring in another ice age, while a rise of this order, while giving a better climate, may melt Antarctic ice and flood a number of coastal cities.

(Jack Legge, reader in bio-chemistry, Melbourne University, in Tribune, July 21, 1971)

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Glossy wrappers, containers and advertising constitute enormous waste in our society, deplete resources and add to the pollution of the environment without benefitting the community at all. Waste is inherent in the capitalist system. Consumers are never given the facts - are never presented with two clear alternatives. As well as the type of product now on the market, there is no alternative of a product of equal performance minus the gimmicks at, say, half the price.

(Dennis Skiotis, former industrial chemist)

"We believe that western technological society has ignored two vital facts", began the advertisement in the "Australian", signed by about 700 scientists, technologists and economists.

1. The resources of the planet earth are finite.
2. The capacity of the environment to renew resources that are used up and to repair the damage caused by the exploitation of those resources is limited and decreasing.

The statement concluded by urging "those who guide Australia's future to investigate:

1. The population that Australia can support over the long term and its relationship with standard of living.
2. The details of a balanced economic system, i.e. a system in which productivity (and consequent environmental damage) is balanced against the capacity of the total environment to maintain itself. With gross national product set by environmental limits, increases in material standards of living must follow decreased population or adoption of less damaging productive processes.
3. The social changes of all kinds necessary to achieve and maintain the patterns outlined by 1 and 2.

For biological and ecological reasons civilisation based on the present western technology cannot survive much longer. Careful forethought and a willingness to embrace fundamental change are necessary if civilisation is to survive at all. Australia's opportunity to examine and implement these fundamental changes before it is too late may be unique. The responsibility is great and the task urgent".

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I don't think there is any adequate research on a world scale which would permit us to form a global picture of all the global cycles in less than a decade, and work has to start now and to proceed at a far greater rate than it is now doing.

But what do we find? One of the first things McMahon did when he took power was to slow down the input-output calculations being done by the Reserve Bank - this is a simple basic factor needed for economic planning, let alone planning for how much cadmium is being produced in New South Wales and is getting into the fish in the Murray.

The other point is that laws can be passed, committees established but this is no proof that the laws will be obeyed or the committees effective. The American "Nation" reported recently that a copper smelting plant in the USA had been told to stop polluting in 1915 but had managed to continue with it right up to the present time. If we take these kind of things into account there is no room for complacency.

(Jack Legge, Tribune July 21, 1971)

THE ENVIRONMENT CRISIS - CAN CAPITALISM SOLVE IT?

based on a speech by MAURIE CROW at a forum organised on the subject by the Communist Party of Australia in Melbourne in August, 1971.

Maurie Crow is a member of the Victorian State Committee of the Communist Party of Australia. He is co-author (together with Ruth Crow) of "Plan for Melbourne".

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When I hear of 800 Australian scientists sufficiently alarmed to warn about changes in the ecological balance I shudder to think of the fate of my grandchildren's children. Either they can freeze in a new ice-age because the temperature has gone down, or the temperature will have gone up. The polar ice will have melted, Melbourne will have drowned, even the Footscray Alps will be under water and they'll have to shift to Mt. Buller, by then the tropical belt.

Clearly, whatever the precise form of the future ecological imbalance, and precisely when it will reach which stage, scientists are sufficiently alarmed to warn about its irreversible character.

In the period of the completion of the transitional phase of socialism on a world scale and from socialism to communism, therefore the problem of ecology seems likely to take on new political dimensions. The worldwide struggle of the people against poverty and exploitation and the worldwide struggle against war will merge in and become part of a worldwide survival struggle of a new type.

In my view the situation is one where production methods, administrative controls and political parties as we know them today are becoming increasingly out of touch with man's needs. None of us, I think, yet fully appreciate the enormous shift required of us by the technological revolution - a shift from the traditional methods we have all become so accustomed to.

First I want to draw a broad distinction between two types of conservation problems. Not being an expert, I am not expecting the definitions I draw to be exactly appropriate because the problems are interconnected anyway.

But there are what I will call "surface" conservation problems; as distinct from "survival" conservation problems.

By "surface" problems I mean clean air, clean water, prevention of soil erosion, preservation or creation of adequate national parks and landscaping generally, and the adequate disposal, treatment or prohibition of the whole range of industrial products which, if not properly disposed or treated or prohibited, cannot be recycled into nature's processes, and therefore offer a threat to them.

By "survival" conservation problems I mean the permanent irreversible effects of using, on a worldwide scale, too much energy

per head, so that the total amount of oxygen in the world and/or the world's climate are altered so considerably as to constitute a threat to all forms of life, including human life.

I draw this distinction between "surface" pollution and "survival" pollution not on scientific or technological grounds, but to make political judgment. My first proposition is that I think capitalism is capable of "containing" the "surface" pollution problem. Maybe it cannot do it in a thorough-going way, but it can slow the gallop down to a trot or maybe a walk.

Already the enlightened sections of the Establishment are quite alarmed by the situation, and are taking initiatives against the sections whose investments are going to suffer somewhat if conservation considerations are to be enforced.

I went to the foundation meeting in Melbourne of the Conservation Foundation a few years ago. It was opened by the Governor-General. Why him? The story goes that when Prince Phillip came to Australia for his study conference stint - the one before last - (about 5 or 6 years ago?) - he asked that the Australian national conservation organisations affiliate to some world conservation organisation. The official establishment was embarrassed, because our own anti-pollution movement hadn't reached the stature of a national body. So, Sir Garfield Barwick and other establishment types set out to create one - naturally with all the "right" people.

Last century, the ruling class of England and Australia, carried out campaigns for universal sewerage, drainage and water supply and set up infectious diseases hospitals, because they realised the ruling class itself would be just as much affected by infectious diseases as the lower classes. The effort didn't wreck capitalism.

Similar and even more powerful forces are at work today within the capitalist class around conservation issues. Admittedly, the scale of the problems is correspondingly greater. The problems of waste treatment and disposal or alternatively of re-designing the industrial processes for a given useful commodity are enormous. But they are enormously profitable too (if I can misquote Lenin). Apart from the bonanza that goes to advertising around the purity of products real or imagined, whole new branches of the chemical engineering industry spring up around treatment plants, and there is always the age-old probability of new products to replace old ones.

There may be stiff opposition from individual capitalists whose investments are heavily committed in capital goods that it is difficult to adapt. Fundamentally, however, the capitalists as a class, are indifferent to the particular use value of the commodity manufactured. Their basic interest is to employ capital in whatever line brings the best return.

Thus G.M.H. already experiment with electric driven vehicles, and even the God-almighty oil industry will have to, and can, "diversify" if necessary. Take the Esso-B.H.P. venture. If the metal monopoly can merge with the oil monopoly to exploit natural gas,

presumably there is nothing to stop the reverse process: oil investments being switched to metal? In other words, if there is a strong enough consumer revulsion against product "A" which is now seen as harmful, then the capitalist has no compunction in switching his investment to product "B" regarded as beneficial. Switching from product "A" to product "B" or process A to process B will not in itself shake capitalism to its foundations: it is a reform of capitalism. That is why some of the more sensible capitalists are all for it.

But it is a reform that is extremely important to the quality of life of the ordinary worker whether industrial, white-collar or professional, and so the whole labor movement and the socialist sector of it should be right in the forefront of this political campaign. In the process, it will tend to widen and consolidate basic class positions.

Part of the tactical struggle will be to prevent the capitalists imposing the costs of treatment of pollution onto the public of whom 80% are workers. For example, if industrial effluents are to be carried away by sewerage systems, the working class, to the extent they have become home-owners, could be made to pay for treatment through M.M.B.W. rates. Or should these effluents be treated by industry itself at its expense? It would be unfair maybe to penalise one manufacturer whose effluents have for generations been regarded as harmless but suddenly discovered to be dangerous and who could now be put out of business if he had to face a crippling treatment cost. Perhaps in such cases a tax on industry as a whole should be levied, to subsidise the necessary treatment or change of industrial techniques.

In the struggle for the reform of capitalism around the "surface" conservation issues, as in the struggles around other reforms, the socialists should aim to arouse the political consciousness of the working class and imbue them with the spirit: if the capitalists can't do it, or do it fast enough, we are going to take a hand - take over the whole system if necessary!

I want to turn to the other type of pollution or conservation issue - "survival" problems. One problem here is that global heat balances impose limits on power production, which generates heat. The underdeveloped countries cannot catch up with the advanced countries' rapidly growing power production without violating this heat balance. Some way of equitably sharing the world's limited capacity for power generation must therefore be devised.

This issue seems to be bristling with problems and with possible solutions such as population control. I want to deal with one of the most crucial aspects.

Capitalism by its very nature, presses upon the market an increasing flood of consumer goods and much of the energy per head expended per average Australian worker is absorbed in accumulating material goods. So some working class families have not only a house with a fridge, a TV and washing machine, but 1 car, 2 car or 3 cars, or a caravan, or a boat, or a backyard swimming pool. Much of the

machinery, like clothing, has built-in obsolescence, or obsolescence due to yearly-changing fashions, so that much of what is bought doesn't last and has to be made over and over even for one family in a lifetime.

If all the machinery a household bought, for example, were made to last twice as long and advertised that way instead of the frenzied style-changes always with us - presumably we could have a given amount of utility with half the energy.

But something more profound, in my opinion, is involved. The workers' struggle to accumulate material goods and to replace them is, in itself, not a very satisfying exercise. To the first generation of workers, who have never had a house, never had a car, never had a proper holiday, it's a kind of compulsion to accumulate all these goods.

The second generation come along and say to themselves: what's the good of it? Here's Dad and Mum slaved all their lives: sure they've got a house and we've got 3 cars and a caravan and TV, but what sort of people are they? Do I really want a suburban house full of all this paraphernalia? I don't want to spend my whole life slaving for material goods! I want to feel human above all: participate with other people in some meaningful activity. In other words, part of the revolt of today's youth, including working class youth, is against the alienation imposed by capitalism.

QUALITY OF LIFE

For such young people it is quality of life rather than quantity of material goods they are looking for. That demand, in my opinion, is a demand which capitalism cannot contain. Creative human activity is basically a simple matter that may need some equipment but doesn't require great quantities and certainly not a continuous flow of material goods, so it "does not pay" the capitalist to invest. There is no big investment money in child care, education, health, theatre, amateur film-making, art or sport, as mass activities. Where top-quality performances can be packaged and sold, e.g. by admission tickets or on TV, or bet on by the betting industry, there is some money, but not for mass-participation of the people in the same pursuits.

Therefore the demand of big sections of our youth for a more simple, more human life-style, can become a trend which cuts down on the drive to amass domestic machinery, especially in its fashion-changing aspects. This also cuts down on the demand for energy per household which coincides with the demands of the conservationists on the survival issues.

But this is only half the picture and it would be wrong to oversimplify the situation. Whereas half the working class have amassed a fair houseful of hardware, the other half are still struggling to achieve it. You cannot say to a newly-arrived migrant, or to a pensioner, or to a deserted wife, or to many unskilled workers: "Look here: you shouldn't be so concerned with quantity, what you need is quality". They are perfectly justified in saying: "You give us a

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decent house, and a TV that works, a decent transport to a well paid job first, - until you do, we are interested in quantity thank you: in fact it's such a struggle to make ends meet that we haven't really time to consider "quality".

POLITICAL CHALLENGE.

So the political challenge facing the conservationists and the labor movement, including the socialists is how to combine in one political movement that half of the working class who have amassed a degree of material possessions and whose youth spearhead is already demanding an enriched quality of life, with that half of the working class still interested in quantity and therefore apparently in increased production because they haven't got enough of the bare necessities.

When we shift the scene from Australia to a world basis, the challenge is high-lighted. Many of the impoverished masses of Asia, Africa and South America may indeed have a more satisfied cultured life than a Melbourne suburbanite, but, they are not going to be told that it is a substitute for a good feed and a good house.

My three political propositions so far are then:

1. That "surface" conservation reforms can be contained by capitalism, but the labor movement should be in the forefront fighting for these reforms.
2. That the "survival" conservation solutions have elements that are so opposed to the basic competitive and expansionist nature of capitalism that they cannot be contained by it, and socialists should back the youth to the hilt on the "quality of life" issue.
3. That simultaneously, although it is a trend in the other direction, socialists have to support those who are underprivileged in material goods to the point when basic needs are fulfilled, although with better planning a man wouldn't need to buy 20 cars in his lifetime.

My fourth political proposition, deriving from the first three propositions is thus:-

4. That although the underprivileged must have their basic needs fulfilled, good planning is essential to ensure that they don't have to run the full gamut of extravagant, wasteful and fundamentally unsatisfying energy-expenditure imposed on the working people by so-called advanced western capitalism.

Time does not permit expansion of this thought. I will give only two examples. Dish washing machines absorb an enormous quantity of water - a relatively scarce raw material in Australia. They also require increased energy to produce the machine and power it. Better to have Women's Lib fight for the husbands to share the job of dish washing and re-establish the nearly lost art of domestic

communication rather than fight for these machines. On another scale Australian cities must not make all over again the freeway mistakes of American cities so that a man has to buy 20 cars in his lifetime, plus say 10 cars for his wife and three for his children.

PLANNING AND DEMOCRACY

My fifth proposition is concerned with the need for planning and its connection with democracy. It has been the fashion in socialist circles, in an over-reaction I think from the authoritarianism of Stalinism, to think of socialist democracy in terms only of workers' control and self-management of enterprises.

I want to pose the problem of democracy in the context of these burning environmental issues, both "surface" and "survival" and act: what are the real requirements?

Whether it is capitalism or socialism, there is only one answer: comprehensive planning.

By that I mean the right combination of planners are assembled to correctly solve every major problem of pollution and that means that industry as well as government at every level must be comprehensively planned and not left to industrialists and Cabinet Ministers and local councillors to decide. If there has been team work involved to date it has consisted of engineers, builders, chemists and the like. To these, now, must be added other disciplines according to the nature of the problem: the particular scientist, biologist, ecologist and sociologist whose advice is necessary not as an afterthought after an industry or development has been established but at the outset and right through the planning stages of the industry or development.

Workers' control, sure - but there are two principles that "workers' control" or "public participation in planning" must stand for, or the concept will be a mockery unworthy of serious consideration. First it must insist on comprehensive planning at all levels of industry and government: no sacred cows of outworn tradition must be allowed to stand in the way of the correct combination of physical and social scientists to produce a comprehensive solution to both surface and survival conservation problems simultaneously reviving a more human quality of life.

Secondly these planners themselves must be charged with the responsibility of producing two radically different but practical solutions to all major problems, namely the new and better way of doing things and what it will mean and all its long-term and genuinely human advantages, and the older, obsolete, traditional and now dangerous way of doing things, and all the dreadful consequences so that people will be able to see the alternatives clearly.

VALUE JUDGMENTS

Public participation does not mean fruitless endless surveys about what individuals want or say they want - how can a worker tell when he has never had an alternative? Workers' control does not mean

workers taking the place of scientists as if they know everything - how can they? What these concepts can and must mean is absolute insistence on the different value-judgments of different solutions being openly presented in concrete and understandable workable alternatives to the workers and public generally.

All democratically elected representatives and committees, ranging from job-control committees up to national parliament must be judged, not by the brilliance of their imagination in election-type promises, not by their success in living within the tradition they are used to but by their success in organising public participation in debating out the newer environmental and humanistic way forward as against the older departmentalised traditionalised and now dangerous methods.

Here is a tremendous challenge to the socialist movement: to organise and demand the truth: the comprehensively-planned human ecologically-sound versus the inhuman, unplanned, and ecologically fatal. With the alternatives fairly stated, what mother or father would vote for the downward path for their own children and plague on their grandchildren? Public participation and workers' control mean a fight for comprehensive planning teams, to present radical alternatives and their real meaning must supersede the autocratic decision-making of Cabinet, boards of directors or caucuses for that matter. I don't believe the capitalists can do this. It is too big a shake-up and goes too fundamentally to the source of their power and the essence of the dog-eat-dog nature of the capitalist system.

Let's give the capitalists a run for their money in the desperate race to reorganise society before we pollute ourselves off the face of the earth! If they can't do it, we socialists and communists can! That's what our system is for. But we've got to be in the race to win it!

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Read:

PLAN FOR MELBOURNE by Maurie and Ruth Crow.

Part one (28 pages) 30c.
Part two (147 pages) \$2.00

Part two deals with updated community services, transport, and urban renewal.

The Communist Party of Australia is a revolutionary socialist party. It supports struggles for social and national liberation all over the world. It campaigns for a socialist society based on:-

* Social and co-operative ownership of Australia's main means of production, economic institutions and mass communications media.

* Equality of rights and opportunities for all citizens, with the aim of achieving the principle of "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

* Workers' control in industries and enterprises with the maximum degree of self-management and autonomy consistent with overall co-ordination and planning in productive units, institutions, and professions.

* The widest intellectual freedom, availability of information on public affairs, abolition of censorship and protection and extension of the rights to privacy, free speech and artistic expression, religion, assembly, association, strike, demonstration, travel, and other democratic rights.

The only limitations on liberty would be those made necessary by violation of the new laws by members of the dispossessed ruling class or others refusing to accept the new society.

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