

The workers' flag is deepest green: class struggles and the environment

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In February 2004, a secret report commissioned by the Pentagon leaked to the press. It warned that climate change over the next twenty years could result in a global catastrophe, sparking natural disasters and wars, in a threat far more serious than terrorism.¹

The only unusual aspect of the report was the source. Many scientific bodies say the same thing. According to the first comprehensive study on the effects of increased temperatures on the natural world, the rate of climate change over the next half century will drive a quarter of land animals and plants into extinction, with more than a million species expected to vanish by 2050. There is a widespread scientific consensus about these facts, represented by the State of Climate Science letter, signed by more than a thousand US experts.²

Environmental destruction today looms as a threat to the entire planet.

With the fate of humanity at stake, doesn't everyone, regardless of their class, share an interest in combating environmental devastation? Actually, the condition of the environment is intimately bound up with class conflict. To understand why, we need to examine humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Humanity and Nature

Today, some highlight the achievements of science and culture to maintain a rigid distinction between humanity and the natural world. Others point to scientific abuses to make the opposite argument, that humans are no different from animals.

Both arguments are one-sided. In contrast to other species, humans lack natural physical advantages (such as sharp teeth, wings or sophisticated camouflage) and thus cannot survive without manipulating the world around them. Our species depends on co-operative labour to build shelter, hunt and collect food, and deter predators. As Karl Marx put it,

Life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.³

The process of co-operative labour inevitably changes the environment. Hunter-gatherers in Madagascar, Hawaii and New Zealand brought about the extinction of many species of unique fauna, and it is possible something similar happened tens of thousands of years ago in Australia, after the arrival of the Aboriginal people.⁴

At the same time, the human labour which alters the world alters humanity. Marx wrote elsewhere that

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature... Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.⁵

Marx's co-thinker, Friedrich Engels, spelled out how human labour--or, more specifically, planned, co-operative labour--fostered the evolution of the human species. The need to act collectively and thus to communicate and plan encouraged the development of consciousness, language and culture. In other words, the traits seen as the highest attributes of our species (the elements most obviously lacking in the animal world) developed from our material needs and, therefore, from the natural world.

Humanity is thus both part of and distinct from nature. It is wrong to see the natural world as merely a canvas on which humans can write. At the same time, it is misleading to reduce humans to 'naked apes', merely another animal species. Marx conceived of nature and human beings as a totality. While they are linked, they cannot be reduced to each other.

This is truer for an advanced civilization than a primitive society. Engels argued that

After the mighty advances made by the natural sciences in the present century, we are more than ever in a position to realise, and hence to control, also the more remote natural consequences of at least our day-to-day production activities. But the more this progresses the more will men not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body...⁶

Humans must eat, drink and have shelter before they can do anything else. Unless we understand how these needs are met, we cannot understand the social order, whether we are looking at a hunter-gatherer society or our own high-tech world.

Any kind of production can be divided into two basic components. Firstly, there are the methods used in labour: the kinds of tools and skills available. These Marx calls the *forces of production*. Secondly, precisely because human production is always co-operative (or, more properly, social), we must examine the way that it is organized. Who is in charge? Who does the work? Who benefits most? These *relations of production* become particularly important when societies develop classes, in which one group, the ruling class, exploits the labour of others.

In chapter 2 we saw how the productive forces can outgrow the relations of production, bringing economic and social crises. But social and environmental crises very often go hand-in-hand. A ruling class in its decadent phase typically devotes more and more of the surplus it has extracted to celebrating and protecting its power, through ostentatious consumption and the development of techniques of repression (armies, prisons, etc) and ideological control (from religious ceremonies to media networks). As the *Communist Manifesto* put it, the process by which a minority spends more and more of society's wealth in this way ultimately ends in 'a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes'. Either the oppressed class takes power and removes the constraints on the productive forces or the society collapses in disarray.

One form of ruination is environmental crisis. A ruling class that, instead of expanding the productive forces, holds them back can eventually exhaust the natural resources upon which it rests, which is why social and environmental crises have gone together in both the ancient and the modern world.

Take, for instance, ancient Sumer. From about 1700 to 2370 BC, Sumer's rulers depended upon the production of barley and wheat to feed an army and a bloated bureaucracy. The need for more food encouraged excessive irrigation which in turn caused widespread salinity.

The size of the bureaucracy, and perhaps even more important, of the army that could be fed and maintained, fell rapidly making the state very vulnerable to external conquest... By 1800 BC, when yields were only about a third of the level obtained during the early dynastic period, the agricultural base of Sumer had effectively collapsed... and Sumer declined into insignificance as an underpopulated, impoverished backwater of empire.⁷

Environmental destruction and capitalism

Today, the same contradiction exists between the forces and relations of production. However, it manifests itself in a different, more explosive form. Capitalism distinguishes itself from other class societies by its powerful inbuilt drive, arising from competition, to increase production. This dynamism has led capitalism to dominate the world within the space of a few hundred years. In earlier societies, the productive forces often remained static for long periods of time. Under capitalism, they have expanded to an astonishing degree.

Though best known as a critic of capitalism, Marx also celebrated the system's achievements: the tremendous advances in science, technology, medicine, the arts and so on. Humanity now possesses the knowledge and resources to provide food and clothing for everyone, to probe the mysteries of the universe and consistently produce immortal works of culture.

Yet capitalism prevents the realization of the potential it has created. The anarchy of capitalist production means that awesome technological advances produce job losses rather than prosperity, that the abundance of food coincides with starvation and that wars become more violent rather than less. Humanity's increasing knowledge of the fragility of the natural world accompanies environmental destruction on a scale which earlier societies could not have imagined. Although environmental crises impact on everyone, capitalists as well as workers, that fact alone will not necessarily induce capitalists to cease environmentally destructive behaviour.

The capitalists face a choice. They can worry about the environment or they can worry about their investments. But a capitalist who ceases to seek return on investments will not remain a capitalist for very long. The nature of the system prevents the capitalist class from taking other than a short term perspective.

The effects are nicely illustrated by the government of George W. Bush. On the one hand, Bush and his advisers recognised that global warming presented more of a threat than terrorism. Yet, as the representatives of the American capitalist class, they stymied even the most modest steps to prevent the greenhouse effect, by, for instance, derailing the Kyoto treaty.

The logic of a class analysis can be spelled out simply. Humanity can opt for the preservation of capitalism or the preservation of a habitable environment.

Environmental struggles in context

What class forces are involved in struggles over the environment? There is no simple answer.

The contemporary environmental movement formed out of the social tumult of the late sixties and early seventies. The campaign against the US war in Vietnam led many to take renewed interest in the developing world. The anti-war movement spilled over into a general rebellion against Western norms and fostered a counterculture of opposition to conspicuous consumption. Many students and young workers revived Romantic notions of nature as a font of authenticity opposed to tacky-tacky bourgeois conformism.

Environmentalism drew strength from intense working-class struggles around the world, struggles that made apparent the possibility of changing all aspects of life. The uprising in Paris during May 1968, for instance, proved that developed countries could still experience mass strikes and its slogans ('Under the cobblestones, the beach') expressed a yearning for a more harmonious relationship with the natural world.

By the mid-seventies, as the world political situation stabilized, many activists lost confidence in social transformation and turned instead to individual solutions. In Australia, this shift was exemplified by the

activities of the former Deputy Prime Minister Jim Cairns. During the anti-war campaign, Cairns led tens of thousands of workers and students in the Vietnam Moratorium movement. But as the struggle waned, he became the figurehead of the first Down to Earth Festival. In December 1976, five thousand people attended workshops on personal growth, natural childbirth, the free family, organic food, meditation, yoga, auric massage and iridology.⁸ Rather than the collective aspirations of the working class, the event focused on the classically middle-class desire for accommodation with the system.

Modern environmentalism thus embodied a host of different ideas, often corresponding to different class interests. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* became a best-seller in the early sixties, with its passionate account of the danger of chemical pesticides.⁹ Carson's concerns pushed implicitly in an anti-capitalist direction. The same could not be said of another environmental best-seller, Paul Ehrlich's 1968 *Population Bomb*.¹⁰ Ehrlich's linkage of ecological disaster with overpopulation revived the arguments of the arch-conservative Thomas Malthus, pointing the finger not at society's misallocation of resources but at the teeming masses in the Third World for their temerity in being born. The argument amounted to an attempt 'to give ecology a conservative, pro-capitalist rather than a revolutionary character.'¹¹

The environment and the working class in Australia

In the developing world, poverty and environmental catastrophes invariably go together. When, in December 1984, toxic gases leaked from a factory in Bhopal, India, the eight thousand who died were overwhelmingly poor. Company director Warren Anderson lived nowhere nearby. He not only escaped injury but has so far evaded criminal charges.¹²

The trend to make the working class bear the environmental costs of business occurs in less dramatic fashion in Australia. When Jeff Kennett's Liberal State Government proposed locating a toxic waste dump in Melbourne's western suburbs, environmental campaigner Harry van Moorst highlighted the class dimension of the decision with his own satirical report. It proposed alternative sites in the swimming pools of Toorak which would 'require little additional outlay and would be economically beneficial especially in view of the fact that several CSR directors and large shareholders already own some of [them]'.¹³

Yet the most important aspect of a class analysis is identifying the working class as not simply a victim of environmental problems but a force capable of overcoming them: a potential subject of history, capable of transforming the world.

The Australian workers' movement has played a major role in environmental struggles. The very designation 'green' was popularised by the Builders Labourers Federation, a blue-collar trade union.

The story of the BLF 'green bans' campaign has been well chronicled.¹⁴ Under a right-wing leadership, allegations of corruption haunted the union. Its members mostly possessed little formal education and were thought passive and demoralised. A reform ticket in New South Wales, led by the socialists Bob Pringle, Joe Owens and Jack Munday, won office in 1968--the year of a general strike in France, a major offensive by the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, ghetto uprisings across the United States, mass protests in Czechoslovakia and militant demonstrations across the world. The political ferment encouraged the new team to commit to participatory democracy and social transformation. As they argued, 'In a modern society, the workers' movement... must engage in all industrial, political, social and moral struggles affecting the working people as a whole'.¹⁵

The BLF launched a militant wage campaign in 1970. It supported Aboriginal land rights, the Vietnam Moratorium and demonstrations against the touring rugby team from racist South Africa.

In 1971, the union received a request for support from residents of the up-market Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill, trying to prevent the development of Kelly's Bush, the last remnant of native vegetation in the area. Some unionists voiced suspicion of 'blue-bloods', who seemed closer to those whom the BLF usually fought than its membership. But Munday carried an argument that saving land for parks was in the interests of working people, as workers tended to be more starved of open space than the rich.

At the BLF's insistence, the residents called a public meeting to officially request a ban on the site; 450 people voted in favour. The ban went on, the developers found it impossible to proceed--and Kelly's Bush still stands today.

Over the next years, residents' groups from across Sydney approached the BLF for help. The traditional union 'black bans' became green bans, put in place to prevent inappropriate development. Representatives of the Australian Conservation Foundation, the NSW Nature Conservation Council and other traditional environmental groups sought good relations with Munday and the BLF.¹⁶ The Munday team was eventually defeated by a joint assault by employers and right wing unionists, but not before the Sydney green bans ignited enthusiasm around the country, both for environmental protection and for rank-and-file decision making.

A few years later, the fight over uranium mining confirmed that, when workers felt their collective strength, they could be won to support environmental demands. In the early seventies, there was little opposition to uranium mining in Australia. The newly formed Friends of the Earth launched a campaign around the hazards of the industry and came together with student groups, Aboriginal organisations and the Communist Party into umbrella bodies like the Campaign Against Nuclear Energy and Movement Against Uranium Mining. Although the agitation began outside the ranks of the workers' movement, it impacted on unions involved in the industry. In September 1974, the issue erupted at a conference of major unions involved in the State Electricity Commission of New South Wales. They resolved not to work on nuclear power stations unless nuclear pollution could be eliminated, and called upon the ACTU to ban the construction of such facilities.¹⁷

Left wing unions went on to pass a strong resolution against nuclear power at the 1975 congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. But the real action came from a confident and combative rank and file. In May 1976, a member of the Australian Railways Union (ARU) refused to load sulphur bound for the Mary Kathleen uranium mine. When management stood him down, the rest of the workforce walked out. The executive of the ARU called a 24-hour strike, which the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen joined. It was the first national strike over nuclear energy anywhere in the world. Both the Australian Conservation Foundation and Friends of the Earth applauded what FOE called 'the action of railway workers in sacrificing pay and standing up against the nuclear lobby which is prepared to put all future generations at risk so as to create profit for a few.'¹⁸ In November and December 1976, 7 000 people around Australia marched against nuclear power, with 3 000 taking to the streets in Melbourne. The next year, the numbers climbed to 15 000 in Melbourne and 5 000 in Sydney.

Further union action dramatically upped the ante. On 2 July 1977, protesters mounted a small picket on the Melbourne wharves against a ship carrying uranium from an Australian mine. Police violently smashed the picket, arresting many demonstrators, including the wharfies' leader Tas Bull. The Waterside Workers Federation blackbanned the ship and called a 24-hour strike.

The experience of solidarity, of standing together against the police, encouraged strong links between rank and file wharfies and environmentalists. As *The Age* reported at the time,

The job delegate for the waterside workers doffed his cap to the crowd. 'We reckon you're lovely,' he said.

And the crowd--about a hundred anti-uranium protesters, standing warily askew the wharf--roared approval.¹⁹

In defiance of their own federal leadership, wharfies decided, by 2 000 votes to six, not to service any ship carrying uranium ever again. For many years there was an ongoing controversy over uranium within the union movement and the ALP.

As might be expected, capitalists viewed the prospect of union based environmentalism with trepidation. Within environmentally sensitive industries, they took steps to prevent its emergence. The forest industry

decided to spend over \$3.5 million in a nationally coordinated attempt to discredit conservationists as irrational fanatics threatening employment opportunities. ... Employer groups with a direct interest in discrediting environmentalists created the media stereotype of 'greenies' as middle-class city dwellers interfering with honest workers' livelihoods.²⁰

Such efforts succeeded in fostering discord between unions and environmentalists. In the forests of south-western Victoria, opposition to clearfell logging brought the Otway Ranges Environment Network (OREN) into conflict with the forestry section of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union. Forestry workers were implicated in physical attacks upon environmentalists, while OREN activists served a legal writ on the union in 2003.

The mainstream press uses such clashes as evidence of irreconcilability between unionists, interested in protecting their jobs, and middle-class greenies, worried about trees. In fact, right wingers made the same case to dissuade workers from supporting equal pay for women and rights for Aborigines, and use the threat of job losses even when workers fight for their own conditions.

Furthermore, most job losses in the timber industry have been the consequence of restructuring by employers, not environmentalists' protests. According to one estimate, over a 15-year interval, 98 per cent of the jobs lost in the timber industry resulted from mechanisation and restructuring, and only two per cent from environmental measures.²¹

It is easy to see the advantages employers gain by inculcating hatred for environmentalists in their workforces. The sentiment weakens the green movement and it weakens the bargaining power of employees. Workers who identify their own interests with those of their employers are more likely to accept poor safety conditions and low pay. So why do many workers still accept this argument?

The green bans took place during a period of low unemployment, which naturally increased union power. The union movement possessed considerable confidence after a number of big wins. The democratic processes fostered by Munday and his team encouraged rank and file participation, which allowed ordinary workers to feel they had a stake in the decisions.

The following decades saw a much lower level of class struggle, and a series of important union defeats. The working class became less conscious of its power to change the world. Fewer workers felt the empowerment of collective action. The idea of BLF-style industrial action seemed unrealistic; collaboration with the employers appeared the only alternative.

The industrial climate will change. At some point, the unions will move back on the offensive. When that happens, the prospects for working class environmentalism will revive.

The environment and the middle-class

Despite the involvement of unions in environmental struggle, according to the stereotype, green activism is inherently middle class.

Part of the explanation stems from an historic failure of the mainstream left, in the Australian Labor Party and Communist Party. Many leftists traditionally identified with ‘Communist’ countries (which, this book argues, should rather be described as ‘state capitalist’).²² The regimes in Eastern Europe, China and elsewhere promoted an old fashioned industrialisation. The 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in the Soviet Union exposed the disastrous environmental outcomes of these policies.

Until late in the twentieth century, influential sections of the left rejected environmental critiques as at best utopian and at worst reactionary.

For the trade unions with more left-wing leadership, nuclear power represented progress, a technical development necessary in any forward looking society whether socialist or capitalist.²³

Within Australia, the impact of left wing suspicion of environmentalists became apparent during the important but unsuccessful campaign to save Tasmania’s Lake Pedder, an unusual and beautiful ecosystem destroyed when the Hydro-Electric Commission flooded the Gordon River in 1972. The novelist and environmentalist Amanda Lohrey remembered how

I was an active member of Labor Youth and I supported the flooding of the lake, as did most of my political cohort... Tasmanian Labor politicians of the day were proud of [the dams], seeing in [them] an emblem of how radical public spending could help lift a community out of the misery of the Depression years and into a better world.²⁴

Pedder campaigners sought union support and BLF leader Jack Munday proposed a ‘blue ban’ to save the lake. But, as Bob Brown recalled, ‘The very conservative Tasmanian unions, steeped in the parochialism which characterised much of Tasmanian society would have none of it.’²⁵ The isolation of the region made working-class support much harder to win. The activist base for the campaign tended to come from bush-walkers and nature-lovers, who, since these pursuits require leisure and income, tended to be middle-class.

The hostility or indifference of the mainstream left pushed the campaign into what Lohrey described as a ‘quasi-mystical fervour’, which abandoned the discourse of labour versus capital in favour of ‘a language that in some respects harked back to the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century but in other and crucial respects went beyond it’.²⁶

When, in April 1972, Lake Pedder’s supporters established the world’s first Green party, the United Tasmania Group, they chose the slogan ‘Politics of the future versus politics of the left and right.’ Such rhetoric did little to explain to unionists, who quite rightly regarded the division between left and right as important, why Pedder should matter to them.

A similar dynamic emerged around the hard-fought battle to save Tasmania’s Franklin River, threatened by a hydroelectric dam. The campaign against the dam won broad support, but its activist base came largely from the middle-class milieu that fought for Pedder. A 1985 survey of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society (TWS), the main organising group, found that sixty per cent of its members held professional jobs.²⁷

Perhaps more importantly, the campaign made a strategic decision to agitate around what some called a ‘post-materialist’ sentiment. Kevin Kiernan of the TWS argued for ‘an emphasis on the philosophical and the eternal--that is wilderness for its own [sake].’²⁸

This approach proved successful in the soulless eighties and the Franklin became a *cause celebre*. Yet the orientation reflected a gulf between environmentalist activists and those, like most working class people, who could not afford to sneer at material gains.

When the Labor Party won the 1983 federal election, the result was a victory for the Franklin campaign and a new era for the Australian environmental movement. The electoral pull of environmental issues gave activists leverage with the new ALP government. In the 1987 election, Labor's return to office depended on preferences from minor parties, and analysts estimated that green support provided a crucial half to one per cent of the vote. ALP machine man Graham Richardson referred to 1990 as the 'green election' since, although it polled only 39.4 per cent of the primary vote, Labor was returned by 'an unbelievable preference drift'.²⁹ Yet ALP governments are committed to the logic of capitalism (see chapter 4). No matter what Labor promises, what it delivers depends very much on social struggles.

The Franklin campaign featured considerable civil disobedience. Between late 1982 and March 1983, more than 2000 non-violent activists blockaded construction sites and the police made some 1400 arrests. With Labor in office, however, the close ties between peak environment bodies and the ALP dampened grass roots activism. An emphasis on lobbying the government encouraged organisations to abandon freewheeling internal structures in favour of more traditional hierarchies. It became possible to pursue a career as an environmentalist. A layer of professional environmental lobbyists emerged, happier cutting backroom deals than lying down in front of bulldozers. Drew Hutton described how the process took place.

When you go setting up a whole lot of green bureaucrats in different environment centres or heading different organisations, these are wonderful, committed people but they're wonderful, committed people sitting on committees with government and industry, lobbying governments on a daily basis and doing everything except going out and mobilizing supporters.³⁰

The pattern was not unique to environmentalists. A similar trend could be discerned in the women's, Aboriginal and gay movements during the same period. The level of struggle declined, the leadership became increasingly upwardly mobile and the rank and file membership disenfranchised and passive.

By the early nineties, the environment movement faced a crisis. The ALP, under pressure from industry groups in a worsening economy, hardened its opposition to environmental demands. By 1998, Labor informed environmentalists that it didn't want their support, since it calculated that rural votes were now more important than those of greens.³¹

The Australian Greens and the anti-corporate movement

The launch of the Australian Greens by a network of environmental groups in 1992 might have seemed a continuation of the same unsuccessful strategy. However, their cadre did not come from the environmental bureaucrats, most of whom were still committed to negotiating with Labor and scarcely wished to align themselves with a fringe party that lacked real political power. The Greens' launch was a remarkably low-key event, as Bob Brown remembered: 'Not one television crew turned up. As if to demonstrate the task ahead of us, on this pivotal day of Green history, the media was totally engrossed in covering the opening of the Sydney Harbour tunnel!'³² Such an occasion would scarcely inspire ambitious political players, accustomed to schmoozing with government ministers.

Fortunately, a different constituency was beginning to make itself felt. The Greens' consolidation as a party coincided with the worldwide emergence of what has been variously known as the global justice, anti-corporate or anti-capitalist movement. This new force gave the Greens an injection of grass roots radicalism.

Although the anti-corporate movement burst into the world's consciousness during the demonstration in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation in 1999, the date of its emergence is disputed. One recent account claims that, on a world scale,

1994 emerges as a landmark year... Resistance to IMF politics in the global south increased dramatically ... ; around the world there were more general strikes than at any previous time in the 20th century according to the labour journalist Kim Moody; radical ecological movements were re-introducing creative direct action tactics to popular protest in the US and the UK--and as the Mexican economy crashed and burned, the Zapatista uprising took the world by storm.³³

The environment loomed large in the priorities of anti-corporate demonstrators. But they differed from the environmentalists of the eighties in their overt focus on links between ecological destruction and corporate malfeasance. Shell, for instance, became a major target of the global justice movement, both because of the damage it caused to Nigeria's ecosystem and because of the human rights abuses it fostered. Many protesters also raised questions about the way the oil giant treated its workforce.

In Australia, attitude surveys during the nineties showed a slow but steady rise in sentiments associated with anti-capitalism, such as hostility to big business, suspicion of the established parties and a concern for the environment. Many commentators noted the surge in support for right wing populism, most notably represented by Pauline Hanson, in the 1996 federal election. But Bob Brown's Senate victory that year revealed the stirrings of a populism of the left.

The Australian anti-corporate movement peaked with the dramatic S11 protests outside the World Economic Forum in 2000, which drew some 20 000 people to demonstrate outside Crown Casino in Melbourne. Placards outside the WEF drew attention to a wide variety of causes, ranging from genetic modification of crops to the mandatory detention of refugees.

The protesters--and that segment of society which supported them--lacked any political representation. They opposed the Liberal Party and many loathed the ALP. Some disdained electoral politics altogether. But others turned to the Greens.

In 2001 and 2002, the Greens broke through to become a serious electoral force, shifting from an exclusively environmental focus to address the sorts of broader social issues raised at S11. By the 2002 Victorian election, the transformation was quite striking. All the Melbourne Green candidates in that poll possessed a background as political activists. None, however, could be identified solely with the environmental movement.

The prevailing political wisdom holds the Greens to be a party of the inner city middle-class. Is this correct? According to Greens strategist Steven Luntz, support for the Greens comes overwhelmingly from two constituencies: people born after 1965 and people with a tertiary education. The highest Green votes have come from those in the intersection of the two sets. In the Victorian State election of 2002, 40 per cent of tertiary educated people under thirty-five voted Green.³⁴

Despite some isolated successes in blue-collar electorates, Green support does tend to come from white-collar employees. As we have seen in earlier chapters, those in higher ranking white-collar jobs can be classified as middle-class or, in the case of senior management, as ruling class. But in most white-collar settings, people in senior management positions tend to be older; those in junior positions are younger. In other words, one of the key determinants of class position within white-collar occupations is age. The massive bias in Green support towards youth suggests that, while some Green voters come from the new middle class, many are in fact on the lower rungs of their profession and as such part of the working class.

Furthermore, the central Green constituency, tertiary educated young people, also provides the core support for the Australian activist left. The Greens enjoy, for instance, a high level of popularity amongst university students, the group most likely to attend political rallies and demonstrations. That is

one reason why the Greens are far more likely to take up slogans raised by activist campaigns, whether about greenhouse gasses or refugees.

But there is another aspect to the Green's openness to such campaigns. Unlike the Labor Party, the Greens lack any formal connection with the unions. The unions provide a source of pressure on the ALP; they also give it a degree of political solidity. By contrast, the populism of the Greens can be politically unstable. Under the influence of grass-roots campaigns the Greens can take very radical stances. Without them, they can lose their political compass.

Greens leader Bob Brown is the most outspoken figure in federal politics, regularly addressing demonstrations and rightly praised for heckling George W. Bush in parliament. But he has, on occasion, taken some strange positions. In 2002, he toyed with supporting the privatisation of Telstra in return for a ban on old-growth logging, a proposal that dismayed the many Green supporters. Though the Greens opposed the invasion of Iraq, Brown supported the initial missile strike by the United States, on the grounds it might kill Saddam and thus quickly end the conflict.

There are other examples. In 1995, when the Greens held the balance of power in the ACT Legislative Assembly, they kept a minority Liberal government in office, supported the privatisation of the Jindalee nursing home, and expressed no principled opposition to the corporatisation of ACT Electricity and Water.

The Greens do not see themselves as overthrowing capitalism. They want to make it fairer. Their focus remains predominantly electoral. So the problems that emerged for environmentalists working with the Labor Party will eventually assert themselves.

The history of the German Greens, on which the Australian party was loosely modelled, provides a warning. During the 1980s, the Greens in Germany contained two tendencies. On one hand, the *realos* explicitly sought to work within the logic of capitalism, through 'realistic' policies and pragmatic reforms.

On the other, the *fundis* argued that principles were more important than wheeling and dealing with the established parties. But while they instinctively rejected the compromises of the *realos*, they did not formulate an alternative to the capitalist system. When the mass movement declined, the *realos* obtained the upper hand. By 1990, nearly half of the *fundis* had gone. The Greens came to act more and more like any other 'responsible' political party, supporting policies that would not interfere with the German economy. The Party substantially watered down its opposition to nuclear energy and formed a coalition with the Social Democrats, the party it initially set out to replace. Greens leader Joschka Fischer even became foreign minister. But, as one commentator noted,

Staple left-wing issues such as aiding the Third World and disarmament have been set aside. With Fischer's approval, Germany has sent troops to Macedonia, Congo, Afghanistan, Kuwait, East Timor, Sudan and Mozambique... Would a Social Democratic or even conservative foreign ministry have looked much different?³⁵

If the success of the Australian Greens continues, the Party will eventually face the German dilemma. It will become a force capable of wielding power, which means accepting the logic of capitalism (in the same fashion as the ALP) and disappointing the hopes of its supporters. Alternatively, its members may recognise that the goals they espouse can only be achieved by a struggle against the system rather than an attempt to govern it.

Conclusion

All politicians today, whatever their political colouration, pay lip-service to the environment. The rhetoric of the green movement gushes forth from the corporations. As a rule of thumb, the more destructive the product, the more its packaging abounds with environmental slogans, as even the most casual inspection of the detergent aisle in the supermarket reveals.

In that sense, there is no necessary connection between working class struggle and environmentalism. John Howard can urge people to separate their newspapers from their household trash without fear the experience will swell the ranks of the workers' movement.

On the other hand, any projects likely to make a difference to environmental destruction necessarily raise the question of class. It is difficult to seriously consider the relationship between humanity and nature without looking at class structure and impossible to contemplate solutions without confronting the workings of the market. After all, scientists possess the technical capabilities to cease environmentally hazardous practices and start the process of repairing the planet. The priorities of the market are, however, different. And the damage continues. The lemming-like march towards an only too predictable future stems not from an innate human destructiveness but from a particular social system which makes rational allocation of resources impossible.

As Winston Smith decided in George Orwell's *1984*, if there is any hope, it lies with the proles. Environmental consciousness has permeated throughout the population. A series of surveys showed that, between 1994 and 2002, the environment ranked as the fourth highest concern for Australians, behind education, health and medicine, and unemployment, but ahead of taxation, welfare, defence and industrial relations.³⁶ The environment clearly matters to many working class people and, in a situation where they felt powerful enough to do something about it, they would.

That is why the question of working class struggle matters. Any strike, even over narrowly economic issues, raises the issue of control over the workplace. Challenging their employers, workers come to feel their own ability to make decisions about other issues. Dave Kerin worked as a builders labourer in the early seventies in Victoria. He remembers how, when bans on buildings were considered,

the membership [would] hear a description of the proposal at a meeting, and [decide] to ratify it or not... At the height, when the radicalisation was at its strongest ... we'd have had 250 to 300 people, probably about half of whom would have been shop stewards... And then at the mass meetings, there would be many thousands... You really did feel a sense of pride, that you were a guardian, to some extent, of our culture, and you weren't going to let some things happen... Collectively you had that power.³⁷

Workers always possess the ability to halt production: without their labour, industry grinds to a halt. Whether or not they feel able to turn potential into action comes down to political self-confidence.

Marxists see the working class as a revolutionary agent not simply because it can bring the system to a halt but because it is the only force capable of liberating the tremendous productive capability of capitalism from the limitations imposed by that system. In an age of nuclear power and global warming, it is only too easy to imagine the 'common ruin of the contending classes'. But what would a revolutionary reconstitution of society mean for the environment?

We cannot go into the question in depth. Suffice to say that the replacement of the anarchy of the market by a democratic, planned economy was central to Marx's notion of socialism. Conscious planning would not only bring an end to the wholesale despoliation of the planet but would allow society to plough resources into repairing the damage already done, in a fashion simply impossible under capitalism.

It might be argued that it is unrealistic to talk of such a world, so far from our present circumstance. But how much more unrealistic is it to expect the status quo to continue, when we know the terrible cost of the environmental damage inflicted every day?

In 1907, the Irish socialist James Connolly argued that ‘Our demands are most moderate--we only want the earth!’ In his day, the slogan sounded like a rhetorical extravagance. Today, it is simply a statement of fact.

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