

Capitalism and the climate

*Introductory talk by Seán Edwards to the CPI meeting on the climate emergency,
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Climate change is back in the news. It is almost unanimously agreed in Dáil Éireann that action has to be taken, with only the climate change denier Danny Healy Rae dissenting. “Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are trying to be greener than the Greens,” he grumbled, accurately. This outburst of green-talk is hardly surprising, given the popular mood, which the established media have accepted and amplified.

The scientific consensus on the climate crisis is well established. 150 years ago the Irish physicist John Tyndall demonstrated that carbon dioxide and water vapour held in the heat in the Earth’s atmosphere. The build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere caused by industrial development had barely begun; it took off spectacularly in the 1950s, and has been accelerating ever since. Scientists have concluded that the changes are sufficient to name the present as a new geological era, which they have called the Anthropocene, defined as “the period of the Earth’s history during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth System.”

Up to the eighteenth century, before the Industrial Revolution, the concentration of CO₂ was about 280 parts per million; now it is 415 ppm, the highest in 14 million years.

By the 1990s scientific researchers had become extremely alarmed at the danger to the ecosystem of the planet, and this was reflected in the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, a treaty signed by nearly all the members of the United Nations. Annual conferences began in Berlin in 1995. The third conference, COP3, in Kyōto, Japan, adopted a programme of action, which has never been implemented, resisted especially by the USA.

Fast-track to COP21 in Paris in 2015; still no action had been taken. The parties agreed on a programme to tackle the climate crisis, which was obviously inadequate (described in our party’s Congress document as certainly too little and probably too late).

Meanwhile the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change accumulates and assesses the scientific evidence. The scientists give their advice and demand action, but to no avail. Some governments, including the USA, are climate change deniers; others—the majority—pay lip service to the need for action. The polluting industries continue to expand, especially the military industry, the greatest polluter of all. The CO₂ concentration and the ambient temperature continue to rise, bringing with them disastrous weather extremes—droughts, floods, heat waves, hurricanes—showing that climate change has already arrived. Rising sea levels threaten a number of low-lying countries.

Since the Paris conference, although only one government (Morocco) has carried out the commitments it made there, there has been a general verbal greening in official government positions; even Russia has finally accepted the Paris accords. Not that that has slowed down the global warming: every year has broken the record for temperature and for CO₂, now up to 415 ppm. Last year’s report from the IPCC warned that a global temperature increase of 1½ degrees could be the limit of safety, rather than 2 degrees, as previously thought. At present trends this level will be reached by 2030.

Further warming, according to the scientific opinion, would trigger the release of vast quantities of carbon dioxide and methane now held in Arctic permafrost, which is thawing. This could result in an even more rapid rise in temperature, enough to make the planet uninhabitable.

The only cure is to stop burning fossil fuels. Governments quietly pretend to agree with this, and encourage the slow and inadequate replacement of fossil fuels with solar and wind power, or even wood burning. (Ask Arlene Foster about that.) Electric cars are somehow expected to save the planet. The Irish government plans to phase out the use of fossil fuels, and replace them with sustainable energy by 2050—twenty years too late, if the IPCC got its numbers right. Its errors so far have been on the other side: climate change has been faster than forecast.

The past year has witnessed a dramatic change, not in action but in popular consciousness. This was kicked off by a cheeky schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg, who sat outside the Swedish parliament and called for a school strike, which met with an enthusiastic response. This has been followed by school strikes round the world in protest at the inaction of governments, followed by the older, if not more mature, Extinction Rebellion. The corporate media, anxious to appear green, made Greta into a star, hoping, no doubt, to tame and train her. However, the taming and training hasn't worked. She continues to speak out clearly and succinctly, telling the billionaire businessmen at Davos and the diplomats in New York that they are responsible for the crisis.

She is telling them to stop destroying the planet. Of course they won't, indeed they can't, for it is the system they rule—not themselves personally, however criminal they may be—capitalism, that has abused and robbed the natural world since its origin and now in its monopoly, imperialist stage is threatening to make the planet uninhabitable. As Fidel Castro repeatedly said, a very important species is threatened with extinction: humanity itself.

Not Greta, not Extinction Rebellion get to the point of recognising that the capitalist system itself necessarily creates the climate crisis. Not even the guru of the Green Party, Richard Douthwaite, who entitled his book *The Growth Illusion: How Economic Growth Has Enriched the Few and Impoverished the Many, and Endangered the Planet* (1992). Somehow he imagined that capitalism could voluntarily stop growing. If it is not growing, it is in crisis.

Of course neither the Green Party nor the Friends of the Earth are prepared to challenge the capitalist system and are looking for a solution within capitalism. Palliative programmes, such as the promotion of electric cars, are promoted, along with wind and solar generation of energy. To quote our own party once again, all the Greens can advocate is a change of life-style for those who can afford to.

Marxist ecological scientists (notably John Bellamy Foster of *Monthly Review*) have recognised that the change in the climate is the result of the development of monopoly capitalism, and that the necessary measures to halt it and save the planet are incompatible with the continuation of the capitalist system. There is no capitalist solution. We cannot save the planet and save the capitalist system.

In the July–August *Monthly Review*, in “Imperialism in the Anthropocene,” Foster and others explain how the climate crisis affects most heavily the poorer, hotter countries, causing catastrophic floods and droughts and hurricanes in the tropics, adding more suffering to that caused by the increasing intensity of economic exploitation. Millions are losing their habitat and desperately try to migrate to the rich countries that have caused their misery.

Our task is to inject anti-capitalism into the environmental protest movement, now very large, angry, and young. Without a socialist perspective this movement will very probably burn itself out, having achieved only a few wind farms, passive houses, and electric cars. The Green “power of one” can never make enough difference to even slow the global warming.