

# Good Planets are Hard to Find

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PUBLISHED BY THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA  
65 CAMPBELL ST, SURRY HILLS. NSW 2010  
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ISBN 0 908077 05 X

## **GOOD PLANETS ARE HARD TO FIND**

**by Dr Hannah Middleton**

Nature's resources are the basis of life for all that lives upon the earth. They are essential for human survival. In caring for nature, humans care for themselves and for future generations.

Humankind's place within nature, as part of the natural world, is recognised by Marxist-Leninists. Homo sapiens have language, the ability to think abstractly and to learn the laws of development. However, this does not mean that human beings are the masters of nature, above or separate from it; they are not qualitatively different from nature.

Linked with this is the understanding that human actions are subject to the constraints imposed by the laws of the natural world. Only by acting in accordance with these laws, aware of the interconnectedness of all our actions and their future repercussions and with a sense of responsibility for present and future generations, can human action be effective and environmentally sensitive.

Humans have always impacted and changed the natural world through their productive activities from the burning off practiced by Aboriginal hunter-gatherers in Australia to grazing herds, ploughing and irrigation. However, changing nature does not necessarily mean damaging or destroying the environment.

Consciousness of human impact on the environment is also not new. Hunter-gathering societies, the longest lasting form of human socio-economic organisation (about one million years), had a range of practices that protected certain flora and fauna (not taking all fruit or vegetable foods from a certain location, not killing young and/or pregnant animals and so on) and beliefs which included a sense of responsibility for nature (such as Australian Aboriginal increase ceremonies).

With the development of productive forces, the creation of surpluses and the emergence of private property and classes, an ideology of exploitation and mastery developed which began to be reflected in attitudes towards nature.

The dependence of humans on nature seemed to be reduced, the scale of human impact on nature increased and nature became externalised, a separation between humankind and nature grew in people's ideas and nature began to be a thing to be used.

The uncontrolled exploitation of the environment and the plundering of natural resources intensified under feudalism and reached its peak under capitalism. Marx wrote: "All progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil..."

## **CAPITALIST SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Today developed capitalist countries are using all the achievements of science and technology to "master" nature. A consumer and predatory attitude to natural resources is characteristic of capitalism and, with the scientific and technological revolution, not only leads to their exhaustion but also brings with it a train of negative and, in some cases, possibly irreversible consequences for the environment.

The ecological crisis arises from social and philosophical attitudes rather than from technology which is a creation of human endeavour.

The socio-economic system that directs the whole course of scientific and technological progress to the making of profit and the exploitation of humankind and nature is mainly to blame for the ecological crisis.

For the capitalist it is really a matter of indifference whether what is produced is useful or harmful for individuals or society. They will be produced if a

market exists or can be created for them and if they yield an adequate profit. The environmental damage their production may cause is equally a matter of indifference.

Engels wrote of capitalism that:

“... in relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominantly concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result; and then surprise is expressed that the more remote effects directed to this end turn out to be quite different, are mostly quite the opposite in character.”

Capitalist governments pursuing policies of economic deregulation, “small government” and reliance on “market forces” are in fact handing over to the monopolies many of the functions and controls previously carried out by the state and elected governments.

Deregulation is being extended into many areas of production and development, leaving the monopolies to increasingly “self-regulate” their own activities.

Governments cutting budgets are spending less on infrastructure and the enforcement of laws and regulations governing the environment. This is resulting in failure to maintain and develop environmentally sound/ safe sewerage treatment, water supplies, transport systems, energy sources, etc.

There is an organic link between imperialism and the emergence and aggravation of the environmental crisis. The drive of capitalism for profits, whatever the human or natural costs, the unplanned, uncontrolled and usually irresponsible development of productive forces for the same purpose, the skewing of research and development of technology, the manipulation of prices and markets, loan and aid programs to ensure transnational domination and other features are evidence of this organic link between imperialism and the acute environmental problems.

In the capitalist countries, there has been and still is a concept of “development” based on the notion that human progress and human happiness can be measured by the production and consumption of more commodities, by greater industrialisation, by increases in the gross domestic product or similar economic indicators.

Within this concept of development, nature is seen as a commodity, a resource to be exploited by and for the purposes of humankind, above all for the profits of capitalist enterprises. Associated with this have been ideas of “mastering” or “overcoming” nature and of humankind as something above and separate from (qualitatively different from) nature.

## **SOCIALIST SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Socialist society is interested both in the harmonious development of nature and human society and also in the acceleration of scientific and technological development.

It is important that the use of natural resources is organised in a way which prevents their destruction, minimises their diminution and avoids the negative consequences of productive activity. The scientific and technological revolution should progress in such a way as not to damage the environment.

This involves the full recycling of industrial waste and the creation of new, waste free production processes. All of this is within the power of socialist society.

Moreover, as techniques and technology advance, socialist society will have at its disposal an ever-increasing range of means whereby its interaction with nature can be improved.

This is not to suggest that the socialist community of nations has not made mistakes which have damaged the environment. However, socialism

arose from capitalist society in which predatory attitudes towards nature predominate. Ideas of mastering nature have not yet been completely eliminated in socialism.

In addition, the drive to meet the people's needs and to defend socialism in the Soviet Union, the urgent needs of reconstruction in the European socialist states after the devastation of World War II, the desperate need to build the economies and defend countries like Cuba and Vietnam have meant insufficient attention has been paid to environmental protection questions.

The errors which have been made sprang from the drive to meet people's needs, from ignorance and from organisational stagnation. They are not inherent within the socialist system as they are in the capitalist system.

A planned economy which has eliminated the profit motive is a prerequisite for finding and implementing solutions to environmental problems. However, five and ten year planning periods may have hindered recognition of these same problems since they frequently take a long period of time to develop.

Marx wrote: "Under socialism, people can regulate their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature, and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature."

## **THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CRISIS**

The biosphere we inhabit is only one, but each country has striven for survival or prosperity with little or no knowledge of or concern about the others. However, the scale of our intervention in nature is increasing the physical effects of our decisions spill across national borders. The growth in economic interaction between nations amplifies the wider consequences of national decisions. Economics and ecology bind us in

ever-tightening networks.

Unless the factors causing by global climatic change, pollution, degradation of soil, air and water, destruction of forests, a food crisis and uncontrolled population growth are brought under control and the trends reversed, global catastrophe threatens.

We are approaching the end of the planetary ecosystem's integrity. On another level, environmental degradation has already caused and is causing immense human suffering and death while shrinking resources can lead to conflict with potential threats to peace and security.

It is necessary to realise that capitalism and colonialism have caused both poverty and prosperity and that both contribute to environmental stress.

Many parts of the world are caught in a vicious downward spiral: Poor people are forced to overuse environmental resources to survive from day to day, and their impoverishment of their environment further impoverishes them, making their survival even more difficult and uncertain.

The links between environmental stress and developmental disaster are glaringly evident in, for example, sub-Saharan Africa. Per capita food production, declining since the 1960s, plummeted during the drought of the 1980s, and at the height of the food emergency some 35 million people were exposed to risk. Human overuse of land and prolonged drought threaten to turn the grasslands of Africa's Sahel region into desert. No other region more tragically suffers the vicious cycle of poverty leading to environmental degradation which leads in turn to even greater poverty.

The prosperity attained in some parts of the world is often precarious since it has often been built on farming and industrial practices that bring profit and progress only over the short term. Much of the improvement in the past has been based on the use of increasing amounts of raw

materials, energy, chemicals and synthetics and on the creation of pollution that is not adequately allowed for in the costs of production processes.

Thus today's environmental challenges arise both from the lack of development in some countries and from the unintended and/or uncontrolled consequences of some forms of economic growth in others.

## **THE MAIN THREATS**

**A)** The greatest threat to the Earth's environment and to human and planetary survival is the possibility of nuclear war, increased constantly by the arms build-up and its spread to outer space. The International Physicians for the Prevention of War stated:

“The leading environmental pollutants are the burgeoning nuclear arsenals with genocidal stockpiles. We therefore must combine educating people on the primacy of the anti-nuclear struggle in protecting against the greatest hurt that may be inflicted on the environment.”

The nuclear industry — mining, refining, enrichment, building and operating power plants, atmospheric and underground testing of weapons — has been a vast polluter. Chernobyl and Five Mile Island are glaring examples of this.

The arms race, nuclear and conventional, adds significantly to world wide pollution. This includes the processes of obtaining and refining the raw materials and manufacturing and testing the armaments. In the capitalist states, measures to improve the environment are greatly hampered by militarisation of the economy and science and huge military spending. So-called local wars gravely damage the environment in large areas. The use and effects of Agent Orange in the Vietnam war is one example.

The production, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons results in many cases in radioactive contamination of the environment, the cumulative effect of which is catastrophic. Examples include the

continuing effects of the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; leaks from French underground nuclear testing at Mururoa in the Pacific, affecting both the human population of the region and the marine environment; dangerous levels of radioactivity around naval bases in Britain, with the incidence of leukemia and other cancers three to five times higher than the national average in people aged 15 to 25 near the Scottish bases of Holy Loch and Faslane.

The concentration of vast economic and human resources on the arms build-up could, as arms reductions proceed, be diverted to the development of alternative technologies, reforestation and other projects required to start dealing with the current environmental crisis. By stubbornly refusing to take the path of disarmament, imperialism remains the main source of wars and the threat of wars.

**B)** The “greenhouse effect” springs directly from increased resource use. The burning of fossil fuels and the cutting and burning of forests release carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). The accumulation in the atmosphere of CO<sub>2</sub> and certain other gases traps solar radiation near the Earth’s surface, causing global warming.

An alternative hypothesis that the earth is in fact cooling down is argued by some scientists and is gaining credence in a number of countries.

**C)** Another threat arises from the depletion of the atmospheric ozone layer by gases released during the production of foam and the use of refrigerants and aerosols. A substantial loss of such ozone could have catastrophic effects of human and livestock health and on some life forms at the base of the marine food chain.

**D)** A variety of pollutants are killing trees, lakes and oceans and poisoning the atmosphere, close to and sometimes thousands of miles from points of emission. Chemical pollutants are also entering the food chain in various ways. Human death and suffering from mercury in fish, the disaster at Bhopal, oil spillages at sea and similar accidents are becoming

more common.

The acidification of the environment threatens large areas of Europe and North America. Central Europe is currently receiving more than one gram of sulphur on every square metre of ground each year. The loss of forests could bring in its wake disastrous erosion, siltation, floods and local climatic change.

Methods used to dispose of toxic wastes, such as those from chemical industries, involve unacceptable risks. Radioactive wastes from the nuclear industry remain hazardous for centuries. Many who bear these risks do not benefit in any way from the activities that produce the wastes.

**E)** Land degradation. Desertification — the process whereby productive arid and semi-arid land is rendered economically unproductive — and large scale deforestation are major threats. Desertification involves complex interactions between humans, land and climate. The pressures of subsistence food production, commercial (cash) crops and meat production in arid and semi-arid areas all contribute to this process.

Each year another six million hectares are degraded to desert-like conditions. Over three decades, this would amount to an area roughly as large as Saudi Arabia. More than 11 million hectares of tropical forests are destroyed per year and this, over 30 years, would amount to an area about the size of India. Apart from the direct and often dramatic impact within the immediate area, nearby regions are affected by the spreading of sands or by changes in water regimes and increased risks of soil erosion and siltation.

Soil loss is a worldwide hazard from Ethiopia, where a billion tonnes of topsoil washes down from the highlands each year, to China, where the grain area has shrunk by nine per cent, to the US, where 15 million hectares of land is being taken out of production, to Australia, where half the arable land is degraded. Over \$700 million worth of production is lost each year in Australia as a direct result of soil erosion — and the problem is

growing.

The risk of increasing salinity associated with these processes is seen in the degradation of the Murray-Darling river system which has led to losses in production of about \$200 million annually.

The loss of forests and other wild lands extinguishes species of plants and animals and drastically reduces the genetic diversity of the world's ecosystems. This process robs present and future generations of genetic material with which to improve crop varieties, to make them less vulnerable to weather stress, pest attacks and disease. The loss of species and sub-species, many not yet studied by science, deprives us of important potential sources of medicines and industrial chemicals. It removes forever creatures of beauty and parts of our cultural heritage; it diminishes the biosphere.

**F)** Deforestation. Denuding land of trees causes a two-fold problem: the destruction of land hit by erosion and flooding, and the loss of a vital instrument for climate control — trees.

The scale and results of deforestation are enormous. Satellites have revealed that 8 million hectares of the Amazon Basin were denuded of forest in 1987 alone. The devastating floods in Bangladesh last year were partly the result of forest being stripped away from the foothills of the Himalayas.

**G)** Urban pollution. Many cities and towns have high levels of pollution arising from a range of causes including motor vehicle exhausts, chemical wastes released into the atmosphere or not properly treated and/or disposed of. Air, food and water are all affected. Asthma and other respiratory diseases, allergies, cancers and other diseases are increasing as a result of the general rise in urban pollution.

**WHAT SHOULD OUR ATTITUDE  
TO DEVELOPMENT BE?**

In some parts of the world, particularly since the mid-1950s, growth and development have vastly improved living standards and the quality of life. Many of the products and technologies that have gone into this improvement are raw material- and energy-intensive and entail a substantial amount of pollution. The consequent impact on the environment is greater than ever before in human history.

Over the past century, the use of fossil fuels has grown nearly 30-fold and industrial production has increased more than 50-fold. The bulk of this increase, about three-quarters in the case of fossil fuels and a little over four-fifths in the case of industrial production, has taken place since 1950. The annual increase in industrial production today is perhaps as large as the total production in Europe around the end of the 1930s. Into every year we now squeeze the decades of industrial growth — and environmental disruption — that formed the basis of the pre-war European economy.

The impact of growth and rising income levels can be seen in the distribution of world consumption of a variety of resource-intensive products. The more affluent industrialised countries use most of the world's metals and fossil fuels. Even in the case of food products, a sharp difference exists, particularly in the products that are more resource-intensive.

For example, the developed countries (26 per cent of population) consume 99 grams per day per capita of protein compared to a consumption of 58 grams per day per capita in the developing countries (74 per cent of the population).

The developed world's per capita share of paper consumption is 123 kg per year compared to 8 kg per year in the developing countries. The developed world consumes 455 kg per year per capita of steel compared with 43 kg per year per capita in the developing countries.

The 26 per cent of the world's population in developed countries consume

5.8 mtce\* per year per capita of commercial energy compared to 0.5 mtce per year per capita used by the 74 per cent of the world's population in the developing countries.

(\*mtce = million tonnes of coal equivalent)

With the increase in population and the rise in incomes, per capita consumption of energy and materials will go up in the developing countries, as it has to if essential needs are to be met. Greater attention to resource efficiency can moderate the increase but, on balance, environmental problems linked to resource use will intensify in global terms.

Environment and development are not separate challenges; they are inexorably linked. Development cannot subsist upon a deteriorating environmental resource base; the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the costs of environmental destruction.

Environmental stresses are linked to each other. For example, deforestation, by increasing run-off, accelerates soil erosion and siltation of rivers and lakes. Air pollution and acidification play their part in killing forests and lakes. Such links mean that several different problems must be tackled simultaneously. And success in one area, such as forest protection, can improve chances of success in another area, such as soil conservation.

Environmental stresses and patterns of economic development are linked to each other. Thus agricultural policies may lie at the root of land, water and forest degradation. Energy policies are associated with the global "greenhouse effect", with acidification and with deforestation for fuel in many developing nations.

Environmental and economic problems are linked to many social and political factors. The basic causal role of imperialism has already been mentioned and the distribution of power and influence lies at the heart of most environmental and development challenges.

We should reject the extreme and alarmist views which argue simplistically that growth must be stopped, that people must consume less. Not only would such policies trap third world peoples in poverty and adversely affect the working class in developed countries, they also display a lack of confidence in the future. They largely ignore the potential development of improved and alternative technologies (fusion power, for example) which are less resource-intensive and less polluting.

The Socialist Party of Australia should instead support the concept of “sustainable development”.

## **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The priorities of sustainable development must be threefold: environmental protection, meeting the essential needs of the world’s poor, and peace and security.

Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. Far from requiring the cessation of economic growth, it recognises that the problems of poverty and under-development cannot be solved unless we have a new era of growth in which developing countries play a large role and reap large benefits.

Sustainable development involves more than growth. It requires a change in the content of growth to make it less material- and energy-intensive and more equitable in its impact. It involves meeting people’s needs for employment, food, water, energy, housing, sanitation and so on.

Sustainable development is based on the notion of the harmony of the environment and humankind’s need. Its concept of growth requires a change to less material- and energy-intensive forms of production. It requires more equitable forms of growth which will meet the needs of all people for employment, food, water, energy, housing, sanitation and so

on. It involves dealing with the problems posed by the increasing world population.

Sustainable development requires that models of development which threaten the environment be changed and alternative production systems and technologies be found. Local technological development must be encouraged to reduce reliance (through research funding and technology transfers) on transnational corporations. Greater attention must be paid to indigenous knowledge and skills rather than the present exclusive reliance on the technology of industrialised societies. This is not a call for a return to the stone age but a recognition of the necessity to find and develop production processes and technologies which do not cause unacceptable environmental consequences and are also appropriate for local circumstances and effective in meeting people's needs.

The ***Brundtland Report*** (Our Common Future, the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations in December 1983) points out:

“The technologies of industrial countries are not always suited or easily adaptable to the socio-economic and environmental conditions of developing countries. To compound the problem, the bulk of world research and development addresses few of the pressing issues facing these countries, such as arid land agriculture or the control of tropical diseases. Not enough is being done to adapt recent innovations in materials technology, energy conservation, information technology and biotechnology to the needs of developing countries. These goals must be covered by enhancing research, design, development and extension capabilities in the Third World.

“In all countries, the process of generating alternative technologies, upgrading traditional ones, and selecting and adapting imported technologies should be informed by environmental resource concerns. Most technological research by commercial organisations is devoted to product and process innovations that have market value. Technologies are needed that produce ‘social goods’, such as improved air quality or

increased product life, or that resolve problems normally outside the cost calculus of individual enterprises, such as the external costs of pollution or waste disposal.”

Sustainable development also requires fundamental reforms in education and training to change the way people think about environmental problems and to develop new consumption standards.

Economic growth always brings risk of environmental damage as it puts increased pressure on environmental resources. But policy makers guided by the concept of sustainable development will necessarily work to assure that growing economies remain firmly attached to their ecological roots and that these roots are protected and nurtured so that they may support growth over the long term.

To return to and stress an earlier point: problems of resource depletion and environmental stress arise directly or indirectly from disparities in economic and political power inherent in the capitalist system and in colonialism and neo-colonialism. An industry may get away with unacceptable levels of air and water pollution because the people who bear the brunt of it are poor and unable to complain effectively. A forest may be destroyed by excessive felling because the people living there have no alternatives or because timber contractors generally have more influence than forest dwellers.

Ecological interactions do not respect the boundaries of individual ownership and political jurisdiction. Traditional social systems (hunter gatherers, pastoralists and early agricultural societies) recognised some aspects of this interdependence and enforced community control over agricultural practices and traditional rights relating to water, forests and land. This enforcement of the “common interest” did not necessarily impede growth and expansion though it may have limited the acceptance and diffusion of technical innovations.

As a system approaches ecological limits, inequalities sharpen. Thus when a watershed deteriorates, poor farmers suffer more because they

cannot afford the same anti-erosion measures as richer farmers. When urban air quality deteriorates, the poor in their more vulnerable areas suffer more health damage than the rich who usually live in more pristine neighbourhoods. When mineral resources become depleted, latecomers to industrialisation lose the benefits of low cost supplies. Globally, wealthier nations are better placed financially and technologically to cope with the effects of possible climatic change.

Here the concept of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) is crucial. The United Nations in its Declaration on the NIEO adopted on May 1, 1974 stated:

“We, the Members of the United Nations ... solemnly proclaim our united determination to work urgently for the establishment of a new international economic order based on equity, sovereign equality, interdependence, common interest and co-operation among all states, irrespective of their economic and social systems which shall correct inequalities and redress existing injustices, make it possible to eliminate the widening gap between the developed and the developing countries and ensure steadily accelerating economic and social development and peace and justice for present and future generations ...”

Sustainable development and the implementation of the NIEO require policies that challenge the power of the monopolies, that replace policies of deregulation with policies of regulation, of tight controls on the operations of monopolies and planned development. This means a reversal of policies of small government and privatisation, and increased funding and the expansion of the public sector. Only then can the necessary planning, regulation and processes be established to make progress towards sustainable development.

## **THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The achievement of sustainable development requires significant political changes. This becomes clear if we pose a number of questions:

a) Can the much vaunted “choice” (which gives us 12 or more brands of detergent and almost as many different tins of pet food) and the planned obsolescence of capitalism persist under a policy of sustainable development?

b) Will capitalist companies willingly introduce the necessary waste-free or environmentally safe technologies and production processes? And if they are introduced, won't corporations try to force consumers to pay for them through higher prices and job losses?

The Government of Southern California recently adopted an air-pollution control plan. This includes such features as:

— 40 per cent of all cars, 70 per cent of trucks and all buses must run on methanol or other “clean” fuels by 1998. By 2008, the plans calls for vehicle makers to be selling cars which run only on electricity or other alternative fuels;

— large bakeries might have to install special equipment to reduce emissions of gases given off during the baking of bread;

— dry cleaners would have stricter emission standards and may have to buy expensive new pollution control equipment;

— breweries would have to install carbon filters on top of their brew kettles to capture escaping gases and reduce their emissions by half.

Already Californian-based companies are responding with talk of sacking workers and closing plants (to move them elsewhere where less stringent or no environmental protection laws exist) and/or raising their prices to compensate for the costs of new equipment.

c) Will capitalism make production choices appropriate for sustainable development, rather than geared to maximum profits, without compulsion?

d) Will capitalism willingly pay for clean-ups and compensation? It has not at Maralinga.

Above all, despite all the reforms and improvements which can be achieved through political pressure and education, the struggle for sustainable development is in essence a struggle to restrain and restrict capitalist corporations, to compel disarmament, to compel an end to environmentally damaging production processes and to compel an end to imperialism's exploitation and distortion of Third World economies.

Sustainable development thus becomes a significant element in the struggle for a new democratic economic system (NDES).

Antagonisms between workers and environmentalists must be overcome. The question is not one of "jobs versus environment" but "jobs and the environment".

Trade unions, workers in the timber industry, defence industry and elsewhere should be won over to alternative policies that guarantee jobs that are consistent with sustainable development. Alliances need to be built between small farmers, workers, environmentalists, peace activists and other groups.

The SPA Program (adopted at the Sixth Congress in 1988) says (page 38):

The environmental struggle raises consciousness about humanity's relationship with nature, stresses social responsibility and the need for democratisation of decision making about environmental issues....

"It is important to build the connections between working class organisations and environmental activists from other classes and strata.

“It is necessary to deal with the crucial issue of the relationship between employment and protection of the environment by raising the necessity for democratic social, economic and environmental planning.

“Public ownership of industry and resources, their democratic control and comprehensive planned development which must necessarily take into account environmental factors is the basis for the satisfaction of the justified demands of workers and environmentalists and the future needs of all humanity.”

## **PROGRAM OF ACTION**

The environmental crisis has reached global proportions such that all nations, irrespective of social systems, must address the problem. The Socialist Party of Australia calls for collective national and international efforts and puts forward proposals which reflect the interests of the working class and all humanity. The Socialist Party of Australia will:

1. Contribute to the efforts to publicise the degree and urgency of the global environmental threat, using The Guardian, Party bulletins, Socialist Alliance election speeches and leaflets, etc. This propaganda will include points about the role of imperialism, the concept of sustainable development and the need for a new international economic order whenever appropriate. We will publicise the 1992 United Nations conference on the environment.
2. Put a major effort into linking the peace-disarmament and environmental issues, both in terms of their root causes and the economic aspects. An example of this is the campaign against the proposed naval base at Jervis Bay (NSW) which is being fought by peace groups, environmental organisations and the local Aboriginal communities. We will promote the idea of disarmament providing the money for an international fund for the necessary programs of earth-atmosphere repair and regeneration.

The project/information kit on environmental issues to be produced by the World Peace Council will be obtained and widely used, together with our own material, for this purpose.

3. Encourage and participate in a campaign in Australia for a cut (in the area of five to ten per cent) in defence spending with the funds released to be allocated to specific environmental and earth/air regeneration projects.

4. Oppose military aid from Australia to the countries of the Asia-Pacific region and argue for its replacement by aid intended to help reforestation and other projects based on the concept of sustainable development.

5. Prepare a study course for use throughout the Party. In addition, more familiarity with information from environmental groups on Australian issues, especially local problems, is essential so that Party organisations can campaign effectively.

6. Become more aware of and where possible initiate and take a lead in identifying and campaigning on local environmental issues as well as working with other groups on these questions. The SPA has participated in the movements against the proposed BHP mill at Rooty Hill (in Sydney's western suburbs), in the campaign about the waste dump at "Toxic Hill" (in Logan City, Queensland) and against a third runway at Sydney's airport. However, far more needs to be done.

Party campaigns can arise on the factory floor, through trade unions, at community level or any combination of these. The range of issues is large and includes pollution from factories in the form of toxic emissions, leaks or spillages and/or dumping (from radioactive pollution from uranium mining in Kakadu and contamination at Maralinga to the recent ICI accident in Sydney); asbestos or other harmful substances in schools and other public buildings; carcinogenic and other harmful additives in food; logging of rain and other Australian forests; mining projects (such as the Rhone-Polenc plant proposed for Pinjarra in WA and the McGee

plant at Muchea); pollution of beaches by sewerage; and so on.

Destruction of the environment is a crime which threatens humanity. Companies which pollute or otherwise damage the environment should compensate the victims, those whose health has suffered as a result of pollution, and pay the full cost of cleaning up the damage they have caused. They should also be subject to massive fines and/or jail sentences for breaches of environmental protection laws. In addition, companies should be forced to install pollution control equipment and environmentally safe technology and prohibited from passing on the cost of these measures to the consumers through higher prices.

Demands must also be made on State and Federal governments to bring in legislation to protect the environment, with stringent fines and jail sentences for transgressors, and to compel companies to cease or change environmentally damaging production processes. In West Germany, for example, new laws give companies in some areas 12 months in which to make the packaging for their products recyclable.

Governments must be pressured to establish plants for recycling industrial and household waste and special corporate taxes should be levied to fund research to develop environmentally-safe fertilisers and similar products.

The role of The Guardian in identifying and leading campaigns on these issues cannot be underestimated. Party organisations and individual Party members throughout the country must obtain material from local and national environmental groups, local papers and other sources and channel this information to the paper so that regular articles on environmental problems and the campaigns against them can be published.

7. Give emphasis to the idea that the major environmental problems cannot be treated separately by fragmented institutions or policies. They are linked in a complex system of cause and effect. At the most threatening level, they are global problems requiring both political struggle

and international co-operation for global solutions.

8. Join other groups in promoting energy conservation and appropriate alternative technology ideas. Every enterprise in Australia should be required to develop an energy conservation plan which should involve such things as conserving resources, recycling techniques and waste control.

9. Promote ideas to reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> build-up. Proposals include imposing a “carbon tax” on burning of coal and oil, stringent efficiency standards for cars, improving energy efficiency and consumption in factories, offices and homes, recycling waste heat from power generation and industry for homes, use of renewable energy forms (solar, hydro, wind and fusion) where appropriate.

The SPA will campaign for greater use and development of public transport rather than continued encouragement for cars to enter the hearts of our cities. Railway diesel locomotives are four to five times more fuel efficient than diesel road trucks and can haul the equivalent of many semi-trailers. Development of a national rail network and transfer of long haul transport tasks to rail from road will bring a variety of net environmental gains.

These proposals are primarily demands on monopoly companies and should be seen as an important element in our struggles for a new democratic economic system (NDES). The sections of our Party documents dealing with the NDES will be reviewed and, where necessary, amended to take environmental protection measures into account.

10. Actively support the concept of Antarctica, which is the last remaining continental wilderness, being declared a world wilderness park. In view of the overwhelming scientific evidence of the profound changes to the environment arising from proposed mineral activity in the Antarctic, the SPA will also oppose mining and mining exploration in this area.

11. Support reforestation projects in Australia and overseas. It is

estimated that planting 40 million hectares of trees in industrialised countries would lower CO2 emissions by 200 million tonnes or three per cent. Associated with this are projects to reduce the current disastrous deforestation, including the development of methane digesters and other suitable technology to replace wood as fuel.

We can also contribute by building solidarity with campaigns to ban the export of certain timbers as well as encouraging efforts to ban the import of these timbers into Australia.

Within our own country, we will support projects to ban the export of certain timbers from Australia and projects to enforce controls on wasteful exploitation of forests, for example, aspects of wood chipping.

12. Support campaigns for the elimination of the use of CFCs and halons in Australia and their replacement by alternative technology.

13. Work to establish and/or strengthen links between peace/disarmament and environmental organisations.

14. Establish the cost and availability of recycled paper for SPA use. Examine and eliminate waste in Party offices and by Branches and see if paper, glass, etc can be recycled. Local councils should be pressured to collect these goods for recycling where they do not already do so.

15. Research information and develop alternative policies which demonstrate that conservation and environmental protection are job creators, not job destroyers, for example, the link between defence cuts and conversion and between logging and jobs.



# THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS: PAST THE POINT OF NO RETURN

by Erna Bennett

*This is the text of a report and subsequent question and answer session at the meeting of the Socialist Party of Australia's Central Committee on October 29 and 30, 1994.*

A recent report of the CSIRO Division of Atmospheric Research that global environmental degradation has now passed the point of no return — that is, the point beyond which at least some permanent damage to the earth's atmosphere caused by human activity can now no longer be avoided — signals a new phase in the world's environmental crisis.

It confirms warnings by environmentalists and researchers that the environmental effects of human activity are not any longer merely local phenomena, but have assumed global dimensions and have global — and permanent — consequences.

This situation qualitatively transforms the task of searching for solutions to the environmental crisis and poses difficult political and social questions. And we can say without fear of exaggeration that mankind's future existence depends on the answers we find to these questions.

The CSIRO report confirms earlier reports of the 300-member Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The news therefore is bad but not unexpected, and reveals the global environmental crisis as the greatest single danger confronting human society today.

It also brings other more insidious dangers. One of these is the emergence and acceptance of attitudes and arguments, even on the left, even among progressives, that the present environmental crisis is so serious that it transcends politics and class. It has been called “a common crisis”, affecting all equally, and thus, it is said, calling for a submerging of social divisions in the interests of the “common good”.

I think we should make no mistake about it that nothing could be more dangerously misleading or farther from the truth.

The crisis is certainly common to all who live on earth, but it does not affect all equally, nor can it be solved by “common action”, if for the two simple reasons that those whose actions have caused it possess political power and show little inclination to change their present course towards disaster, and that the majority of the human population who are aware of the danger and wish to oppose the dangers are politically un-empowered to take the necessary actions.

The environmental crisis is created by a ruling class and by its rapacious exploitation of earth’s common resources for its private ends.

Ignoring present warnings, it continues to aggravate the crisis by a callous and reckless disregard for the predictable consequences of its activities.

Its power to act in this way is defended by the policies of governments which facilitate the interests of the ruling class, even to the extent of concealing the gravity of the global crisis from electors to whom they are responsible and answerable.

This is frequently done behind declarations that environmental protection

measures will not be allowed to adversely affect the economic interests of the country — meaning, of course, the economic interests of the ruling class.

Even at this late stage, in face of the now inevitable danger of permanent environmental damage, many northern governments have failed to sign some of the conventions passed at the Rio Earth Summit more than two years ago.

Nothing indicates more clearly than this the truth of the old definition of governments as the executive committee of the ruling class. It also shows us that to resolve the environmental crisis it is not enough to talk about ecology — resolving the crisis caused by capitalism's profit-seeking onslaught on world resources demands a confrontation with powerful vested interests.

The aggravation of the environmental crisis calls for greater not less awareness of class conflict, and urgently underlines the great need for a rigorously class-based analysis of the nature of that global crisis and how to resolve it. The world's tree-huggers must be armed with class-political as well as ecological weapons — enthusiasm, devotion and self-sacrifice are not any longer enough.

The entire earth has become an ecological timebomb. Day by day the human environment deteriorates dramatically, and newspaper headlines daily report situations and events which a mere two decades ago would have been considered as fanciful and unreal.

This deterioration has always been, and still remains a direct consequence of actions furthering the interests of the private sector — even at the cost of environmental damage which puts in doubt the certainty of human survival on this planet.

## THE HISTORICAL PHASES OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Let's look at the historical phases of the environmental crisis to understand how we reached this situation.

Mankind's impact on the environment dates from the industrial revolution of the 1700s. We should say mankind's negative impact because obviously until that time agriculture, which has lasted for 10,000 to 15,000 years, has left an enormous impact.

The first of these stages caused severe local environmental effects in the shape of unsanitary mills and slums in which workers worked and lived out a wretched existence, yet in spite of its degrading impact on the living conditions of its working class victims, it might also be claimed that this early industrialisation did — eventually — bring counter-balancing benefits. It was, nevertheless, a stage that for more than one hundred years was marked by “dark, satanic mills” and the deadly slums of early capitalism.

Following World War II, capitalism underwent a considerable transformation and became based on transnational corporations and with much greater impact on the environment. A surge of post-war industrialisation was marked by increasingly severe levels of pollution from the products of sophisticated chemical industries and to this was added the new problem of radioactive waste from nuclear power plants and the manufacture of nuclear weapons.

There was also the rapidly growing problem of the widespread chemical pollution caused by the fertilisers and pesticides of an agriculture that had assumed industrial dimensions — and was best described as agro-industry.

This was as a component of the so-called “green revolution” which in the early 1970s rapidly became a major cause of severe environmental damage on a world-wide scale and which wreaked enormous havoc on

the agricultural biosphere with the death of agriculturally useful fauna and micro-fauna (the “silent spring” effect) and by converting the soil — which those of us who have worked with it know was always a living thing — into a sterile medium.

With this stage, though environmental pollutants were applied locally, it was done on such a scale as to cause generalised, regional pollution of agricultural land and non-agricultural environments by the widespread leaching of agro-chemicals into rivers, lakes and other waterways, leaving vast tracts of land sterile and waters poisoned both to mankind and other species.

During this second stage widespread damage to agricultural eco-systems first awakened concern about possible cumulative effects of global scale and significance.

Finally, the latest stage, which had a rather diffuse beginning because most of us did not see the beginning happening, most of us were not even aware at the beginning what kind of road we were embarking on.

In this latest stage intensive urbanisation, intensive industrialisation, intensive concentration on private transport, on road transport, on fossil fuels led to a degree of atmospheric pollution which became evident first as pollution in cities, making living conditions extremely difficult, making premature death a much more common thing, but this time having other effects which we had not foreseen at the beginning.

The stage was marked by a mounting, accelerating damage to the earth’s atmosphere by industrial and other gas emissions as part of a process of degradation in which the rate of destruction is greater than the rate of repair.

Two processes are at work. First the release into the atmosphere of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other halogen gasses (used in aerosol sprays and refrigeration equipment) destroys the ozone layer which

normally provides protection against damaging radiations from space, in particular ultra-violet radiation.

UV rays are high-energy radiation with carcinogenic effect. The loss of ozone renders exposure to daylight dangerous both to the skin and to the eyes. In the UK, where the ozone layer has suffered less damage than in Australia, the incidence of lethal skin cancers has almost doubled in the last 15 years.

In the second process at work, the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide (and methane) has increased massively, produced from fossil fuels mostly but produced also from the land that would normally have carried forests, which would have absorbed the carbon dioxide before its release into the atmosphere. The consequences of this is that the atmosphere's carbon dioxide content has increased by a quarter since the industrial revolution, but fully half of this increase has occurred in the last 40 years.

This carbon dioxide pollution of the atmosphere leads to increase infrared absorption, leading to what is known as the "greenhouse effect" — it traps heat rays coming from the earth and reflects them back to earth, heating up the earth's surface. Reliable estimates at the moment seem to indicate that this effect will raise world average temperatures by one or two degrees by 2050 — but by the year 2300 by 10 to 18 degrees centigrade.

Now just in case you think one to two degrees is not very much, it is worth bearing in mind that the last Ice Age saw average temperatures on earth roughly only five degrees lower than they are today.

Temperatures in the south Pacific have already risen by 0.4 to 0.8 degrees between 1951 and 1993. In Australia, temperatures have risen since the turn of the century by 0.1 to 1.0 degrees and are still rising.

In some respects, serious as the problems created by them may be,

industrial and toxic wastes appear to be the least of the environmental hazards we face today. Their effect remains, so far, local rather than global, and in theory at least they are amenable to management.

But the toxic waste problem vividly illustrates the extent of the social irresponsibility behind the environmental crisis. For example, capitalist-inspired “solutions” speak of the need for “management” of waste, and rarely of limiting, much less of prohibiting production of toxic waste, regarding it as the least of our environmental problems.

Let us look first, then, at this “least” of our problems.

In a modern capitalist society where more is spent on advertising than is spent on medical and agricultural research combined, it is not at all surprising that consumerism leads to waste on an enormous scale. Solid wastes produced annually in the USA are enough to build a wall 75 feet wide and 20 feet high along the frontier with Canada each year. It costs \$5 billion a year to dispose of this waste.

Australia is second only to the USA in the production of solid waste. Every Australian discards, on average, a ton of solid domestic waste every year, reflecting the consumerist pressure of modern Australian society, as does Australia’s energy consumption which is three times higher than the world average.

In the US, 300 million tons of toxic materials are discarded annually in more than 50,000 dumps. A study by the US General Accounting Office reported that in 1983 three quarters of all hazardous waste landfills in the southern states are sited in minority communities.

In Australia, evidence of a similar policy with uncontrolled dumping of toxic waste in New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and other states has been exposed by <I>The Guardian<D> and the Socialist Party on many occasions. Many of these cases reveal a cynical disregard for public health when residential areas have been constructed on former

dumps. Toxic landfills — legal as well as illegal — have been linked to the increased incidence of leukemia and other cancers.

With the same disregard for consequences, the industrialised countries export 20 million tons of toxic wastes annually to the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa for dumping there. As opposition to toxic dumping grows in the rich countries, many “agreements” have been signed which are little other than bribes to the elites of former colonies to accept these socially dangerous substances.

Dioxin wastes have been dumped by the USA in Haiti and Guinea. Australia has signed agreements with several South-east Asian countries to dump toxic wastes there that cannot be dumped at home. Italy, Denmark and Britain have traded thousands of tons of similar wastes with Nigeria and other countries in Africa.

Denmark, I ought to say, is often portrayed as one of the excellent examples of waste management — paid for mostly by the taxpayers and not by the producers — where waste is collected in a very systematic way, classified in a very systematic way and stored in a very systematic way — to be, eventually, loaded onto ships and dumped in Africa. This is, in fact, the capitalist answer.

Some of the ships carrying these wastes spent months at sea as they were referred from one Third World port to another, as country after country refused them entry. The <I>Zanoobia<D>, the <I>Karin B<D> and the <I>Deep Sea Carrier<D>, to quote three infamous examples, were forced, in the end, to return to Italy where the wastes they carried had to be destroyed where they were created.

It is worth taking note at this point that we are speaking of substances which, because difficult to destroy, neutralise or otherwise convert to harmless or degradable materials, demand costly operations and significant investment.

Such costs naturally cut into profit margins in a competitive capitalist world where loss of competitive advantage may mean going to the wall in a cut-throat battle for survival at the top. No corporation is therefore likely to view proposals for such solutions as valid.

It is worth noting that the wastes that have been treated in the countries of their production have often been destroyed at public expense. Matters are frequently organised in such a way that waste disposal is conducted in this way at public expense even though waste production is not in any way being curbed.

## **RADIATION**

It has been known since the beginning of the present century that radioactive radiation is carcinogenic. In the last few decades, radiation-induced leukemia has been found to cluster near to, and to spread down-wind from nuclear sites in Europe and the USA. In such areas the incidence of cancers in the unsuspecting general population is high.

The incidence of leukemia along Ireland's east coast, washed by the Irish Sea into which Britain's somewhat notorious Sellafield nuclear plant discharges its cooling water, is three times higher than Ireland's national average.

At Mururoa Atoll, where French nuclear testing has been carried out for 20 years, there is now indisputable evidence from a number of investigations that — in contrast with official declarations — the radioactive materials generated by nuclear weapons testing there, equal to 100 Hiroshima bombs, is now leaking into the environment.

In Micronesia, whole populations have been affected by cancers and genetic damage caused by 40 years of nuclear tests. In one group of islands, almost every child has suffered from thyroid cancer. The frequency of stomach cancers is many times higher than found in unaffected populations.

Whether caused by military or civilian nuclear activity, the evidence of serious medical effects arising from irresponsible disregard for the environment is overwhelming, but it is with non-nuclear processes that capitalism's negative impact on the environment is at its most devastating.

When we turn from our lesser problems with local effects and come to the question of our negative activities with global effects, the situation in fact becomes extremely worrying.

## **GLOBAL WARMING**

The rape of natural resources, be they minerals, timber or fossil fuels, by economies driven by the imperatives of modern capitalism, has converted enormous tracts of every country, and very notably this country, into semi-deserts.

The rate of loss of forests is something which is quite staggering. In the Amazonian forests, some single years have registered something like between seven and ten million hectares of forest destroyed.

This, in turn, creates major problems because of loss of control of the water table and water flow. Natural plant cover regulates water flow. Deprived of climate normally maintained in equilibrium by forests, the environment lurches uncontrollably from one extreme of destructive floods to another of equally destructive drought.

Even more important, however, are the less obvious, global effects of such misuse of the land. Without the carbon-dioxide absorbing forest cover, vast tracts of de-forested land are raising carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, leading to atmospheric warming in the "greenhouse effect" we've already referred to.

This effect is enhanced by the conversion of cities into vast concentrations of carbon dioxide production that — along with other

chemicals — aggravate the warming effect. This effect signals a turning point in human history, marking the point at which human social activities produce an environmental impact on a global scale.

More than five billion tons of carbon derived from fossil fuels are deposited in the atmosphere each year. To this we must add about one to two billion tons that would otherwise have been absorbed by the forests destroyed by deforestation.

The carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere has increased by 25 per cent since the industrial revolution — from 275 parts per million (ppm) in the late 1700s to 315 ppm in 1960, and to 350 ppm in 1988. Thus half of this rise has occurred in the past 20 to 30 years alone.

In many parts of the earth, but particularly in those parts which are ecologically fragile — that is, in the former colonies where totally inappropriate agricultural systems have been employed — environmental damage from de-forestation, the effect of fertilisers, pesticides and inappropriate irrigation practices, and over-grazing driven by poverty has already permanently destroyed something like 11 million hectares of land. Another 1.5 billion hectares are seriously degraded, and recovery is likely to be prohibitively expensive.

Add the global warming effect to such a picture — drawn, be it noted, by colonialism — and we begin to appreciate the sheer scale of the emergency we now face.

The IPCC — no revolutionary body — warns that their studies show a sharp drop in the snow cover of many mountain ranges, a reduction of glaciers and sea ice, and a rise in Pacific Ocean levels of about two millimeters every year.

Global warming is releasing even greater quantities of carbon dioxide and methane, another greenhouse gas, from thawing permafrost, thus accelerating atmospheric re-heating.

As I have already mentioned, it is calculated that by 2050 average world temperatures will be some two degrees higher than today, but other studies suggest that mean temperatures could increase by a possible minimum of ten degrees or more by 2300.

When we talk in terms of small fluctuations in average world temperatures, we are talking about very major climatic effects. To put the figures in context: a rise of four degrees in mean temperatures would create conditions on earth warmer than for 40 million years and, as I said earlier, even during the latest Ice Age, mean world temperatures dropped to a level only five degrees lower than today.

Climatological studies at Oxford University indicate that crop production in Third World countries — already marginally sufficient for needs — could fall by 2060 by 9 to 11 per cent, driving grain prices beyond the reach of hundreds of millions of people.

Entire regions of Africa and Asia will face desertification, and many of Europe and North America's traditional crops will fail. Hundreds of millions of people will face displacement as rising sea levels threaten major cities in most countries.

## **OZONE LAYER DEPLETION**

Without going further into these predictions, which are dealt with in the official Rio Earth Summit documents on climate change, let us look instead at some effects on health of one aspect of atmospheric pollution — the depletion of the ozone layer.

A ten per cent reduction in the ozone layer causes rapid aging in human skin; suppresses the immune responses leading to an increase in infectious diseases; and increases eye cataracts. Forest trees and crops show stunting; more than 300,000 cases of non-melanoma skin cancers have been reported world-wide.

A 50 per cent reduction reduces plankton production by about ten per cent, with a corresponding effect on fish populations which feed on the plankton and a subsequent effect of humans and other land animals who feed on fish; it causes blindness in fish and other land animals, including man; and an increased incidence of lethal skin cancers.

And yet, depletion levels in the ozone hole have exceeded 60 per cent in recent years — that is, greater than the values known to cause blindness and deformed plant growth.

Over whole regions, exposure to life-giving sunlight is now not beneficial, but dangerous. Ultra-violet-induced eye defects are rapidly increasing, and the incidence of lethal skin cancers in Australia linked to ozone depletion has reached epidemic levels.

In short, capitalist over-production, over-development and consumerism have brought the world to the verge of disaster on a scale that challenges the imagination.

## **GREEN POLITICS**

Concern about this danger has given birth to “Green” politics and political movements and parties which have enjoyed growing success in many countries.

But the failure of the Greens to link the environmental crisis with the logic of the capitalist system, or to understand the close link between the capitalist drive for accumulation and the ruthless exploitation of the environment, deprives the Green movement of an effective tool for the analysis of cause and effect.

Their failure to understand that it is the profit imperative of free-market capitalism and the competitive struggles it generates has encouraged calls for actions that “transcend class” but fail to point out that

environmental degradation is the consequence of the rapaciousness of a class that is still disinclined, even in the face of mounting global danger, to stop at nothing in the drive to maximise corporate profits.

No discussion of the environment can have meaning if it fails to face up such questions of a social and political character. The failure to do so is the crucial weakness of the green and other ecological movements, in spite of the leading role they have played in exposing the environmental dangers

It is not enough to talk about or even explain environmental problems — it is brutally clear that resolving environmental issues will demand confrontation with powerful and ruthless vested, class interests.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

The question is, what can be done? But first it might be best to begin with the question, what should not be done, and what cannot be done?

These questions bring us to a consideration of what we mean when we say certain things. It is painfully clear that if the future for the industrialised countries is bleak, that for the countries of the Third World is even bleaker.

Now I have spent 25 years in the United Nations where it is the accepted custom in diplomatic double-speak to speak of these two groups of countries as “developed” countries and “developing” countries.

It is abundantly clear, however, to the most casual observer that the problem of the so-called developing countries is that they are not developing. Whether their condition is measured in absolute or relative terms, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the gap between rich and poor countries is widening, not narrowing, and this for two reasons — the rich countries are getting richer, and the poor countries are getting poorer.

Clearly, we must re-consider our definitions.

For a start, can the poor countries aim at the condition that has been attained by the rich countries? Should they? Is this condition a desirable objective? Must development necessarily be measured in terms of constantly expanding production and consumption, leading to runaway waste and consumerism? Should every family in Africa, Asia and Latin America have a car?

Should we not ask, rather, in the presence of an environmental crisis and the critical problem of global warming, whether it is right for every family in Europe or America or Australia to have a car? It is there, after all, that the global warming problem has its origins.

Fidel Castro, in his unequalled study on “The World Economic and Social Crisis”, provides data that indicate the unreality of continuing on such a course of consumerist development.

In a famous interview since published in book form, he notes that the motor car is a characteristic of developed capitalist society.

“Let’s not think of Belgium, or Sweden;” he says, “let’s think about China with more than a billion inhabitants. Just imagine what it would be like if every family in China had one or two cars! How long would the raw materials for that industry last?.... Just imagine if every family in India had a car, or if all the African and other Third World countries set out on such a development program. The pollution that now exists in the world resources would be exhausted much more rapidly.”

He concludes saying, “Actually, I don’t see any real objective possibilities for a Third World country seeking those models.” And for two reasons — first, they must avoid capitalist models and second, they cannot attain capitalist models.

They cannot aim at capitalist models of development because the

capitalist countries have been able to do so only because they have preyed upon the resources of their colonies abroad. As a result they are not “developed countries”, as conformist definitions would have them, but rather are “over-developed countries”. The countries on which they have parasitically enriched themselves have suffered “under-development” in the process.

We must therefore speak not of “developed” and “developing” but by “over-developed” and “under-developed” countries, and just in case you might think this is merely a play with words, let me say that in the search for the development model that Castro speaks of it is just as important to be able to define what development as an objective should not be, as it is to say what it should be.

We need to be aware of the nature and the errors of over-development.

What, then, should be the model? Castro does not hesitate. It should be a socialist model.

Clearly, since the environmental crisis has been caused by the capitalist model of development, the only model which permits avoidance of over-consumption, and which aims at rational use of resources for the public good, is the socialist one.

Socialist production is not slave to the mechanisms of market economics that lead into the frenetic cycle, the vicious circle of competition, advertising, consumerism, and waste. Socialist production aims at satisfying needs, not over-producing commodities many of which have little relevance to real needs, and which lead to the grotesque over-use of energy.

But this had to do with political choices for the future. What about the existing crisis? What choices can we make to resolve that?

## **POLITICAL OPTIONS**

One thing is clear. Ecological options are political options. We owe it to the green movements that ecological problems have been brought to the top of the political agenda. But we must not allow the political, and above all, the class content of these problems to be ignored.

In some respects, the environmental crisis is the form assumed by the crisis of capitalism in the era of the transnational corporations. Capitalism is very evidently an unsustainable system. We are probably witnessing capitalism's final crisis. We must be sure, however, that it is not also the final crisis of human society on this planet.

This demands that we strengthen our links with ecological and environmental movements, but also that we inject into them the political content and class analysis without which they cannot understand or explain the processes of degradation that remain the major danger of our age.

But we must also look again at our own patterns of energy and resources consumption. As I said, capitalist society is "over-developed". We must confront the politically sensitive problem of reducing consumption — in spite of consumerist pressures — to levels that correspond to reality.

It is somewhat grotesque when you think of it that we are threatened at this particular time with a particularly serious incidence of radiation from space which affects our health negatively, yet that same radiation from space could supply a very great part of the energy that could supplant fossil fuels, if we were so inclined and so organised socially as to respond to it.

There are pressures, essentially market pressures, the pressures of profit-taking which determine the character of our energy generating-industries and this has its negative effect also on solar energy utilisation.

However, it is nonsense to speak — as the Montreal Protocol does —

of limiting gas-emissions to 1990 levels. At 1980, even at 1970 levels, atmospheric damage was already far advanced. Choosing 1990 as a benchmark year is a sop to industrial interests, and cannot be defended on any realistic interpretation of present dangers. What we need is not a halt to increases in pollution levels but a clear and unequivocal reversal of present trends.

Similarly, increasing production of waste must not merely be halted — it must be reversed.

And parties on the left must face the task of defining how the consumption patterns of society can be reversed, something which I think is extremely sensitive. It is hard to persuade many to do this at the present time, because it points to unpopular options.

There are some telling examples of this.

Many years ago, I was on the Science Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain (as an Irish woman, that word “Great” always stumbles on my lips). The Buchanan Report on traffic in cities had just been published and the Party wanted it examined by the Science Committee in order to come out with a policy statement.

The Buchanan Report starts off with the sentence: “By the year “X, there will be “Y” million vehicles on the streets of the cities of Britain. Therefore ...” and along followed several hundred pages of closely argued reasoning to show how we should deal with these “Y” million vehicles that by the year “X” would be on the streets.

And I thought, there’s something wrong here, its the first sentence that’s wrong. If you do not accept that first sentence, the rest of that report is nonsense — and I said so.

But unfortunately the Chairman of the Science Committee at that time was Bill W. and Bill had just bought himself a car, for the first time in his life, and Bill says: “You wouldn’t deprive us of the pleasure of the motor car, would you?” And you know, Bill’s view prevailed over mine and

unfortunately we did accept that Buchanan Report with its premise carried in the first sentence and we came out with a big policy statement that I think was a bit of a disaster.

Of course, it wasn't just Bill, it was also that the whole bulk of our membership in the Communist Party worked in the motor industry, Coventry and Birmingham, and what were they going to do if we said we were against car production?

You see, this is why I say that this is a very sensitive issue and a measure also of how sensitive it is is this other, rather important example.

In the early 1970s, in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, Belinguer, the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, made an extremely important statement which more or less summarised a series of conclusions along the lines that we in the industrialised countries must learn to live with austerity, we must plan to live in austerity, we must plan to cut consumption, we must plan to cut services, we must plan to cut waste, and we must plan to cut energy consumption.

It was an extremely good statement, it appeared in "l'Unita", but the following day there was no reference to it, nor was there any Party document referring to it and in fact, I regret to say, the Party hushed it up. It was much too sensitive an issue at that time and yet it was an act, I think, it was the statement of a far-seeing man who said it and perhaps was then more or less caught in the difficult situation of deciding how does one present an unpopular policy.

How can we tell the Australian people that they are consuming too much water, too much light, too much heat, too much this or that? How can we? This is going to require a lot of very serious thinking, because without thinking and policy on these matters we are going to betray our profound ideological commitment to the environmental question.

One the things that I ought to close with is this: One of the surprising

findings of the CSIRO report is that it amply confirms some suspicions nurtured by environmentalists in recent years on the serious negative environmental impact of logging and de-forestation.

De-forestation's impact on watershed and water table management is already clear. What is now clear is that fully a quarter of the gases leading to global warming are attributable to forest destruction. This lends a new edge to struggles to defend the forests.

Tree-hugging is now just as much a part of the class struggle as is the struggle in defence of the dispossessed and landless poor whose retreat into the forests has sometimes been, in the past, among the first causes of forest degradation — for it needs to be remembered that behind the sophisticated causes of our present global disasters lies capitalism's greatest crime — poverty in a world of plenty, and brazen wealth in a world of poverty.

The global emergency also throws our political agenda against some serious deadlines. Either we defeat capitalism soon, or it will destroy mankind with all its hopes for any sort of a tomorrow.

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Comrade Erna Bennett then answered questions from comrades at the Central Committee meeting.

Q. What part do genetic engineering and the patenting of seeds, plants and so forth play in the current environmental crisis?

A. Patenting of genetic life forms is one of the consequences of the

intensification of agro-industry and the usurpation of plant breeding by private corporations. Up till not all that long ago, 30 or 40 years ago, it was the rule for plant breeding to be done by government institutions and the exception for it to be done by private institutions. Now it is quite the other way around.

The government plant breeding institutions provide basic research which benefits the big plant breeding organisations which are all run by not just corporations but by petrochemical corporations who produce the pesticides and the fertilisers that these varieties need. So we facing a kind of two or three prong attack on the genetic diversity which is public property.

A part of that attack is the usurpation of market rights — the patenting — which gives them complete domination of the market for a specified number of years (it varies from country to country) but it also means that farmers are forced to buy uniform varieties which are much, much less responsive to environmental stress than the varieties that they have grown in the past.

As far as genetic engineering is concerned, there is a lot of slightly exaggerated panic sown around about this, panic which I think is directed in the wrong direction. The danger is not the genetic engineering. The danger is who are the genetic engineers.

It's a bit like a knife. A knife can be a killer or it can be a creator, it can operate in the hands of a murderer or a surgeon. It's exactly the same with genetic engineering.

As long as genetic engineering is in the hands of the privileged powerful, then it will not serve the interests of the unprivileged poor. That's obvious and that is the danger.

Q. Do you think that the question of environmental pollution in socialist countries is significant?

A. Yes, I think it is something we should be prepared to examine and discuss.

To begin with, let's be very clear about one thing. We only became aware of environmental dangers of global dimensions arising from human activity, we began to be suspicious that something was about to happen something like 30 years ago, maybe 40 if you were very imaginative and pessimistic. So that in fact no people made any serious attempts to stem developments in the wrong directions.

When we talk about these socialist countries — East Germany, Poland, China is a very good example — we have to bear in mind that they were attempting to create conditions where social development was extremely accelerated compared to the rates in the capitalist countries. They were trying to do in a couple of decades what most of the big capitalist countries had done in a couple of centuries.

And so industrialisation was a big, big factor. And not only was industrialisation a factor but home produced energy sources was a big factor. They couldn't import clean fuels — nobody knew about clean fuels at that time anyway — so they used coal, a dirty fuel. Their idea was: this is an awful mess but at least we're raising the living standards of our people.

By the time it became common knowledge that this was already an extremely dangerous thing environmentally in a permanent sense and a global sense, or a regional sense at least, they were already in it up to the ears and there was very little that they could do.

Very, very little indeed, bearing in mind one other factor which was that all the socialist countries were caught in a cleft stick because industrialisation and military spending for defence against the threat of

the cold war gave them no options.

When we're talking about the environmental pollution produced by the socialist countries we must bear in mind: a) that the only model that existed was a capitalist model; b) the objectives could only be met in a certain way by using the energy sources there were; and c) nobody was aware until it was very late in the day of what the global and permanent damage might be.

But a little point is worth bearing in mind. Here is a report from the Sydney Morning Herald in June 1991 which describes the level of pollution in China as "terrifying" and it describes some terrifying effects — desertification, 79 million hectares of forest disappeared in the last 40 years, and it goes on and on about how absolutely dreadful it is.

But there's a little note at the bottom to say that the developed world pollutes much more heavily than China. In other words, it is terrifying in China, it's terrifying everywhere, but the developed world — which knows a damn sight more and has a damned sight many more options open to it — is much more heavily polluted than China.

And just how much more heavily, I'll tell you. The production of pollution that affects the ozone layer, for example, in the United States is 520,000 million tons — shaving stuff and hair fixing lotions and all these things that are designed for capitalist consumers who have lost the energies of their little fingers and can't squeeze toothpaste tubes any more. All that amounts to 37.7 per cent of the world's production of CFCs. China and the underdeveloped countries produce 2.9 per cent. You find these kind of figures and comparisons everywhere you look.

Q. Working to clean up the Cook River, what we're picking out of the river is mostly indestructible stuff that that comes from MacDonalds, from Cadburys and similar companies. But nothing is ever done about

the companies that produce this indestructible stuff that floats along in the Cook River which is one of the deadest rivers in Sydney. I would like to hear your comments on the implications of waste “management” strategies and the “Clean Up Australia” campaign.

A. My feeling is one of shock. Coming from Europe to Australia four or so years ago, I was astounded when I went into Sydney sometimes to get my lunch to discover that everybody in Sydney eats their lunch out of a plastic box with a plastic fork and a plastic cup.

And I thought, well now how many people work in Sydney? Is it a million or half a million or whatever? How many plastic boxes a day are produced for this outrageously defiant use of environmentally harmful material?

Mind you, it's not so much harmful in the sense that it's not, as far as we know, poisonous, but in sheer quantity and in sheer permanence and when we think in terms of the sheer non-necessity of it, the thing becomes grotesque. And it should simply not be permitted.

I'll tell you, most places in Europe people wouldn't eat out of a plastic box and if you offered them food out of a plastic box, I think they would probably refuse to buy it.

My attitude to the “Clean Up Australia” campaign very much compares to my attitude to the elimination of these or minimisation of pollution damages after the act. I think it is an extremely expensive operation. There is not enough done to enlighten people on the nature of the polluting, what is it that is causing this.

I have a couple of Italian newspapers here, and I regret to say, the Communist Party paper. “Wherever man passes, the grass doesn't grow any more” — “Man”. Not capitalism but “man”. “The earth is sick, it needs a new man”. The implication is that mankind is just a nasty species altogether and what the hell can you do about it.

This, in a communist newspaper, to me is something that we should not be prepared to accept. It's not mankind. Unfortunately I believe that one of the inevitable side effects of this kind of cleaning up campaign is some nice people are making up for the vast majority of not nice human beings. And I don't think this is the right way to look at the problem.

The campaign against waste is a campaign against the production of waste by a capitalist society out of its mind for profit in any conceivable way, in the easiest and most rapid possible way imaginable. And that simply is not any longer on.

Q. Pressure on farmers to farm intensively, using large amounts of fertiliser, pesticides and so on has led to a range of problems including desertification, soil erosion, salination, blue green algae contamination of waterways and so on. Some farmers beginning to farm without all these chemicals. Do you know the extent of this movement?

A. It's very rapidly growing. It's slightly "eco-nuttish", if you'll forgive the expression. They are people, many of them, who have bees in their bonnets but they've got the right end of the stick basically which is this — they are arguing that once upon a time farmers grew their crops without all these intensive applications of fertiliser and they grew them quite well, thank you very much.

Along came the green revolution varieties — the so-called high yielding varieties which are in fact not high yielding unless you feed them highly, but are really high response varieties. But the high response varieties are great if you cover them with pesticides and fertilisers. They yield like nobody's business and you seem to be making an awful lot of money.

But a lot of that money goes back into the petrochemicals' pocket for the fertilisers and pesticides you had to buy along with your seed. Basically what's happened is that farmers have become debt peons to the

corporations with this use of high inputs.

Now the farmers are beginning to think, well, if I spend less on fertiliser I won't grow so much but I won't have to pay so much either. And they are beginning to discover that the yields, yes, are less, the crops generally are healthier and they are in fact not so much out of pocket.

I ought in this connection to mention one of the most outrageous trends that illustrates very well a lot of the thinking and feeling behind the activities that have created the environmental crisis and that is this:

When I was a plant breeder many, many years ago, one of the great things we liked to do or liked to think of was breeding disease resistance into our crops. And that was one of the normal things a plant breeder did — to breed for yield, for disease resistance, for adaptability to this or that particular climatic or soil condition. Disease resistance was a normal objective in plant breeding.

Not now. Do you know what they're doing now? Pests are becoming used to pesticides, they're becoming resistant so you have to apply more. But you have to apply it to crops that are already on the edge and are beginning to wilt in the face of this pesticide onslaught. Even the crops are failing.

So the petrochemical corporations that also sell the seed have come to the conclusion that the best way to get over this crisis is to breed pesticide resistance. So that in fact all the major petrochemical seed producing corporations at this particular time have on the market or are about to release on the market within this year or next highly pesticide resistant crops.

In a world already choking with poisons, to do this and to invite farmers to double and quadruple and quintuple the pesticides that they put on their crops is an act of the grossest social irresponsibility, historical irresponsibility.

But this is what is happening. And even died in the wool conservative agronomists in the United States are beginning to say: but where's the sense in this? Well, the sense is there, the sense is profit because the market is a captive market.

One thing we should say about farming in Australia is this — Australia is the driest continent in the world, Europe is one of the wettest. Isn't there something illogical in transferring the agricultural system of the wettest continent in the world to the driest continent in the world without even attempting to change it?

Cotton, wheat, sheep, grass .... There is something very, very wrong in the initial thinking there which was of course the old colonial thinking. But that colonial thinking has left an agricultural pattern which still needs to be changed and some farmers are trying to change it by growing drought resistant crops and growing pest resistant crops.

But here's where another snag comes in. Because of this onslaught by the seeds corporations, the new seeds have virtually wiped out the old seeds so finding drought resistant crops or finding pest resistant crops to breed from is becoming increasingly difficult. Its a bit like building your house on the quarry from which you take the stone to build the house. At a certain point, you reach a no-no situation.

Q. Could you comment on what appears to me to be the OECD approach of taxing companies that are polluting.

A. My approach to the carbon tax is that it is amazing, I find it almost impossible to believe that serious people can accept it as a serious way of tackling the problem.

This is because it simply means that the rich, who can afford to pay the

tax, can pollute to their hearts content and pay for it whereas the poor, who can't, will be forced to either cut down on their energy production or trade their carbon tax for advantageous trade exchanges. There is even talk of using carbon tax as a trade off with those countries that too poor to be able to pay it.

In other words, not only are we allowing the rich to buy their right to pollute, but we are giving those same rich certain trade advantages by being able to buy certain things in return for paying the carbon tax of countries that cannot afford to pay it themselves.

I think the carbon tax is a wildly off course, non-attempt at a solution.

Q. In a coal producing, over-developed country like Australia, have you any suggestions about how we start to go about dealing with the problems?

A. Coal, fossils fuels, are very dirty, but dirt, as any housewife knows, can always be swept up and put away. The same goes for carbon and soot. The real problem for capitalism is that it eats into your profits to do so.

Let's face it — practically every industry, even the industries which produce toxic chemicals, can be clean industries but it is costly to do it and capitalists are not interested in the outlay.

Very often what happens is that industries that are dirty are made clean by public investment so that Tom and Dick and Harriet pay their taxes to help the coal miners or the car plant operators keep their operations clean. That's the way capitalism would like it.

But essentially there is really no reason at all why we can't use even the

dirtiest of fuels, provided we treat the process in a sensible way. This doesn't mean that we can continue to think in terms of profligate energy use. That has got to be cut out.

There's another thing and that is that for a long time capitalism, consumerism has concentrated on what you might call linear processes — you produce something which does this, which provides that and at the end, it does nothing.

Like the packaging that you get around biscuits. You put a package round some biscuits, you put a package around the package, you pack half a dozen of these together in a bigger package, you pack all the bigger packages in a big carton, and that all goes into a big box which then goes by transport. All these layers of useless material have nothing to do at the end of the run.

But if you look at natural process, they're cyclical — the end product of one process is the raw material of another.

Now when waste burning from energy production is indulged in, this is part of a cyclical process — you are reproducing energy from the products that would otherwise be wasted, but its an extremely primitive and inefficient way of doing it.

We ought perhaps to be thinking more specifically in terms of cyclical processes rather than linear processes and if we do, then there are in fact a number of chemical processes in coal, in energy production from coal, which can be operated reasonably cleanly and still provide levels of energy production that would satisfy reasonable social demands.

Q. Can you comment on the environment-employment relationship. It's not just a question of workers fearing they will lose their jobs but also the problem that new, environmentally damaging projects, often win support

because it is claimed they will provide new jobs.

A. Did you see that film on the TV about a month ago about Harry Bridges? Harry Bridges was a Melbourne man who went to the west coast of the United States and organised the longshoremen into a union. He described how, fairly well on in the day, when the union was well established and he was attempting to establish some kind of an agreement with the employers, the employers kept on saying to him, listen, if it wasn't for us, you guys wouldn't have jobs.

He kept negating this. He said, look, I cannot talk to you as long as you think that you're there to give me and my union men a job. You're there to make money, we're here to earn a living. When you can think of things that way, maybe we'll have something to talk about. And in the end they did see things his way, and they did have something to talk about, and they did establish union agreements.

The same thing applies here. Capitalists are not interested in the business of giving you or anybody jobs. But it happens to be a damn good line and they're sticking to it.

Now there isn't any doubt about it, that there are certain social divisions of operations and activities and production processes that produce more jobs and others that produce less. This is understood, everybody knows this, this is the way things are. Our job as workers and as people interested in the problems of the working class is to see that the divisioning, the dividing up of social processes is done in such a way as to be of an advantage to the majority of the people. After all, that's what social responsibility and socialism are about.

If the employers decide to do it differently, then I consider they are being obstructive, not us, in insisting on it being done that way.

In other words, here I think we are dealing with something that certainly, yes, has some effect at a local level on the number of jobs in that area,

and we've got to be able to manoeuvre in such a way that we can arrive at agreements that minimise damage to the working class.

But we cannot allow them to pretend that they're to give us jobs or that they are opposed to certain policies because those policies would cut down the number of jobs that we can have.

I think its an ideological question as well as an organisational question — but certainly the employing classes are not there for our benefit but for their own.

Q. I have heard it suggested that the crisis is leading to a qualitative change in the earth's atmosphere. Do you think that is a valid proposition and, if so, what sort of qualitative change?

Secondly, a practical question on the drought here at the moment. How do you think we should present this? The government is just throwing money at the problem and, in effect, saying carry on as you did before but it seems to me that certain parts of Australia must be evacuated from farming altogether if they are ever going to regenerate.

A. To look at the drought problem first. I think frankly we are looking at the cumulative effect of the wrong kind of agriculture for very very much longer than it should have been applied.

It's possible, just possible, that wheat farming could have succeeded in Australia had they not gone in to the high yielding varieties with their very high demands for fertiliser and water.

It's a question of what kinds of crops to grow in certain kinds of conditions. I have pictures of wheat crops in many of the wheat producing areas of central Asia in which, on an area the size of a table, I suppose you might

have 50 plants, 30 plants, sparsely growing so that the actual yield is very, very low. And when I say that is a wheat crop, people are surprised.

That kind of intensity of production is perfectly possible in many of the drought stricken areas of Australia provided you have drought resistant varieties and provided you have a minimum — not a maximum — of inputs so that the actual expenses that the farmer must dig put of his pocket are minimum.

In terms of livestock production, sheep production for wool is a luxury that simply doesn't fit in with the kind of climate that many of these sheep are being reared in. One could conceivably think of other animals that are, in fact, much more resistant to drought conditions and do produce a kind of fleece, but a much coarser fleece which instead of going into clothing, as Australia likes her wool to go, goes into carpets and things like that. This is a much less remunerative market and therefore much less satisfying for the big industrial-scale producers.

And here is the second factor. The vast majority of Australian farmers in wheat and wool are industrial-scale producers. The ones we hear about, who are being driven with their backs to the wall and selling the farm, the ones who fill the pages of tragedy about the drought, are of course the small producers and this is always the way it is.

I think there is a lot to be said for re-dimensioning agriculture in those areas. There are conceivably also areas that should not be farmed at all. On the other hand, I do not think that there is any point in contemplating such a step because there are so many other alternatives that could produce a solution before going that far back in the line of reasoning. There are also other crops besides wheat and sheep and this also raises enormous numbers of possibilities.

As far as the question of qualitative change goes, I may have emphasised the health aspect more than others because in fact we're actually in that situation, we're in the middle of a series of health effects of atmospheric origin.

But in fact the health aspect is possibly less worrying than the long-term climatic aspect which is that very large parts that are now productive on the earth's surface will become unproductive and real problems of producing enough food are going to arise.

In terms of the qualitative change in the earth's atmosphere — yes and no. If by qualitative change you mean a different mix of different gasses, the answer is no, not for at least half a millennium or so.

But there isn't any doubt about it, that if the carbon dioxide emissions are allowed to continue at the rate they are now entering the atmosphere, then by the year 2200 I imagine there will be a serious possibility of qualitative changes in the atmosphere.

But by that time I think it will be an academic question because if it does continue that long, our continuing existence is very very much in doubt. That's what point of no return actually means.

Up until this decision that we have now passed the point of no return, there was something we could do. Now there are serious doubts that there is anything we can do to stop permanent damage. In those circumstances, all we can aim at now is to work as hard as we can, as best we can to minimise what damage is done.

# **THE ENVIRONMENT**

## **DOING WHAT IS NECESSARY, NOT WHAT IS POSSIBLE**

**by Dr Hannah Middleton**

### **CAPITALISM, GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Capitalist economies are based in part on the exploitation of nature. The exploitation of nature is the expropriation of land, natural materials, and energy sources at one end of the production process and the expropriation of the waste-absorbing capacity of the environment at the other end — without paying the cost of maintaining the capability of nature to continue supplying the one or to continue absorbing the other.

This exploitation becomes obvious in the quantity of natural resources, renewable and non-renewable, that capitalists withdraw, and the methods they use to obtain these resources. It shows up in the methods of production, distribution and waste disposal which impact the health of workers and the community, and burden air, land, and water with pollutants.

The power to so use resources, inherent in the private ownership of the means of production, is also the power to dominate governments and limit correction of environmental problems. That is why we have such inadequate efforts to reduce and repair the effects of pollution at home, and further degradation of the environments of countries subject to imperialist exploitation.

Growth — often measured through GNP and GDP — measures the flow of goods and services and the increase in the amount of commodities and services available. It is a model derived from the needs of capitalist industrialisation.

The impact of growth can be seen in the distribution of world consumption of a variety of resource-intensive products. The more affluent industrialised countries use most of the world's metals and fossil fuels. Even in the case of food products, a sharp difference exists, particularly in the products that are more resource-intensive.

For example, the developed countries (26 per cent of population) consume 99 grams per day per capita of protein compared to a consumption of 58 grams per day per capita in the under-developed countries (74 per cent of the population).

The developed world's per capita share of paper consumption is 123 kg per year compared to 8 kg per year in the under-developed countries. The developed world consumes 455 kg per year per capita of steel compared with 43 kg per year per capita in the under-developed countries.

The capitalist concept of growth is based on the notion that human progress and human happiness can be measured by the production and consumption of more commodities, by greater industrialisation, by increases in the gross domestic product or similar economic indicators.

Within this concept of development, nature is seen as a commodity, a resource to be exploited by and for the purposes of humankind, above all for the profits of capitalist enterprises. Associated with this have been ideas of "mastering" or "overcoming" nature and of humankind as something above, separate and qualitatively different from nature.

There is no place in this model for notions of social justice or sustainability, not for what is really valuable to human society.

As a yardstick of progress or of economic and social advances, GNP is a bankrupt indicator. By measuring flows of goods and services, GNP undervalues qualities a sustainable society strives for, such as durability and resource protection, and overvalues many it does not, such as

planned obsolescence and waste.

For the capitalist it is really a matter of indifference whether what is produced is useful or harmful for individuals or society. They will be produced if a market exists or can be created for them and if they yield an adequate profit. The environmental damage their production may cause is equally a matter of indifference.

Shoddy appliances that need frequent repair and fast replacement raise GNP more than a well-crafted product that lasts, even though the latter is really more valuable.

The pollution caused by a coal burning power plant raises GNP by requiring spending on lung disease treatment and purchase of a scrubber to control emissions. Yet society would be far better off if power were generated in ways that did not pollute the air in the first place.

## **UNDER-DEVELOPMENT**

Imperialism affects one country after another in Africa, Central and South America and Asia, causing environmental problems on a huge scale. The under-developed or so-called developing countries cannot aim at capitalist models of development because the capitalist countries have been able to grow in the way they have only because they have preyed upon the resources of their colonies abroad.

When the power of the transnational corporations has been challenged, outright war or “low intensity conflict” have taken their environmental as well as human toll, from Vietnam to Nicaragua to the Gulf. The Gulf War was waged over who is to own and control Persian Gulf oil. As a result, both the people and the environment in Iraq were decimated, while in Kuwait millions of gallons of oil were burned, polluting air, land and water.

The Communist Party, USA points out: “The current imperialist assault on the global environment is clothed in the propaganda of the global

market and marches under the banners of NAFTA and GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariff). Lowering environmental protection, the global market will raise profits for the corporations, and destroy both people and nature, not only abroad, but at home, too.”

## **FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE**

The Communist Party, USA points out: “Every environmental struggle — on the job or in the community — comes up against the corporation that owns the mine or the oil wells or the utility, the factory or the forest. This ownership gives the corporation the power to oppose change in the direction of a better environment.

“Every environmental struggle to change state or national policy, comes up against the combined power of national and transnational corporations....”

Fundamental change is needed to meet the global environmental threats. Fundamental change means economic change, and a new politics built on the new economic base.

All humanity is in danger and the danger comes from activities by humans, not from natural or supernatural forces beyond our control.

We should never forget Marx’s warning that the revolutionary struggle can result in the ruin of both the contending classes.

But all humanity is not making the decisions and guiding the operations that are devastating nature and undermining our future. It is the big corporations that are doing so in pursuit of profits.

Difficult choices will have to be made. The only question is, who will make those choices, and how? Will working people be the victims of change, or will we help control that change for the benefit of ourselves

and our children?

## **SOCIALISM AND A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY**

In an earlier report to the Central Committee, it was pointed out that: **“In some respects, the environmental crisis is the form assumed by the crisis of capitalism in the era of the transnational corporations.”**

Against capitalist over-production, over-development and consumerism which have brought the world to the verge of disaster we pose socialism and sustainability.

A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without jeopardising the prospects of future generations. Inherent in this definition is the responsibility of each generation to ensure that the next one inherits an undiminished natural and economic endowment.

**There are no existing models of sustainability.**

Efforts to understand sustainability often focus on what it is not. Obviously an economy that is rapidly changing the climate on which its food-producing capability depends is not sustainable.

But this negative definition leads to a strictly reactive posture, one that has us constantly trying to repair the consequences of our destructive behaviour.

**The World Bank tries piecemeal to assess the environmental side effects of projects it funds. But none of its member countries has a coherent plan of action aimed at achieving sustainability which logically should provide the basis for deciding what investments are needed in the first place.**

This is a defensive approach, one that attempts only to avert unwanted

effects rather than working positively and consistently towards a sustainable economy.

The priorities of sustainable development are environmental protection, meeting the essential needs of the world's poor, and peace and security.

Sustainability cannot be achieved without a massive shift of resources from military endeavours into energy efficiency, soil conservation, tree planting and other necessary development activities, together with their consequent job creation.

The concept of sustainable development recognises that the problems of poverty and under-development cannot be solved unless we have a new era of growth in which developing countries play a large role and reap large benefits. However, this growth must be less material- and energy-intensive, more equitable in its impact and based on alternative, environmentally-friendly production systems and technologies.

## ENERGY

### **A sustainable world economy will not be powered by coal, oil and natural gas.**

Direct conversion of solar energy will be the cornerstone of a sustainable world energy system. Not only is sunshine available in great quantity, but it is more widely distributed than any other energy source, renewable or fossil fuel.

Renewable energy sources are direct sunlight, wind, hydropower, geothermal energy, wood and agricultural wastes. In 1990, Norway and Brazil already obtained over half their energy from renewables.

## EFFICIENCY

Reducing carbon emissions and cutting energy consumption requires huge improvements in energy efficiency but the technologies to accomplish this are already available.

No technical breakthroughs are needed, for example, to double car fuel economy, triple the efficiency of lighting systems or cut average heating requirements by 75 per cent.

Refrigerators now on the market can reduce electricity use from 1,500 kilowatt-hours per year to 750; other models being developed would bring it down to 240 kilowatt-hours.

New compact fluorescent globes use 18 watts rather than 75 to produce the same amount of light.

## **RE-USE AND RECYCLING**

Most materials used today are discarded after one use — about two-thirds of all aluminium, three quarters of all steel and paper and an even higher share of plastic.

Recycling reduces energy consumption and helps cut land, air and water pollution down.

For example, newsprint from recycled paper takes 25 or more per cent less energy to make than that from wood pulp. Paper from recycled material reduces pollutants entering the air by 74 per cent and the water by 35 per cent as well as reducing pressures on forests in direct proportion to the amount recycled.

An energy saving of almost two-thirds is achieved when steel is produced entirely from scrap. Steel produced from scrap reduces air pollution by 85 per cent, water pollution by 76 per cent and eliminates mining wastes altogether.

## EMPLOYMENT

Union and academic studies have shown conclusively that jobs increase with pollution control. Conversion to a more sustainable economy will bring a healthier economy as well as a healthier environment.

Changes necessary for more sustainable production would require more workers, not fewer. Some of the “technologically advanced” but environmentally destructive methods in both mining and logging have been developed specifically because they use fewer workers.

“Losses in coal mining, auto production, road construction, and metals prospecting will be offset by gains in the manufacture and sale of photovoltaic solar cells, wind turbines, bicycles, mass transit equipment, and a host of materials recycling technologies. In land-rich countries and those with an abundance of agricultural wastes, alcohol-fuel plants will replace oil refineries. Since planned obsolescence will itself be obsolete in a sustainable society, a far greater share of workers will be employed in repair, maintenance, and recycling activities than in the extraction of virgin materials and production of new goods.

“Wind prospectors, energy efficiency auditors and solar architects will be among the booming professions stemming from the shift to a highly efficient, renewable energy economy.” (State of the World 1990)

Workers, however, are understandably sceptical when it comes to a change that affects their own industry.

They know only too well that economic changes tend to impact most heavily and most negatively on the workers.

The promise of a generalised increase in jobs is small comfort if they see an immediate loss of their own jobs, especially at a time of high unemployment.

## **High employment is needed to make the transition to a sustainable economy without a high cost to workers.**

We have to find ways to develop jobs programs that will create environmentally sound jobs everywhere, and specific jobs programs that will be implemented in tandem with environmental changes, plus public works jobs to clean up the problems left behind by past assaults on nature.

Antagonisms between workers and environmentalists must be overcome. The question is not one of “jobs versus environment” but “jobs **and** the environment”.

Trade unions, workers in the timber industry, defence industry and elsewhere should be won over to alternative policies that guarantee jobs that are consistent with sustainable development. Alliances need to be built between small farmers, workers, environmentalists, peace activists and other groups.

## **POPULATION**

Some people claim that the principal environmental problem is too many people. Blaming population growth for all our problems deflects attention from the real culprits and the real solutions, and too often becomes not merely anti-population growth, but anti-people.

The most extreme advocates of zero population growth are willing to abandon whole countries to starvation because they have failed to balance people and resources. Never mind that the resources may well have been decimated by generations of imperialist exploitation.

Linking population and development is a strategy of blaming the victim. It tends to lay the blame for growing poverty, hunger and environmental degradation on the poor and hungry rather than those who consume far

more than their share.

Unfair global economic policies and not the growing world population are the primary cause of the spiralling human and environmental crises.

Increasingly, development aid is being tied to strong pressures for “family planning” (i.e. population control). But the best approach to combat poverty, world hunger and ecological degradation is not through heavy-handed population policy but through more equitable socio-economic policies and fairer distribution of wealth and resources.

According to a Rockefeller Foundation study some years ago, Kerala had achieved child survival and life expectancy rates close to those of much richer “developed” countries. Kerala’s lower fertility rate than neighbouring Indian states, in spite of less aggressive family planning campaigns, was attributed to its policies of development based on equity.

During the Batista regime, Cuba had one of the highest fertility rates in Latin America. After the revolution, the government introduced one of the world’s most equitable systems. Contraceptive methods were available but the government for many years had no policy of promoting family planning. Yet during the first decade of the revolution, the birth rate plummeted dramatically — far more than in those Latin American countries with strong family planning campaigns but few social guarantees for their impoverished masses.

Population growth cannot be substantially reduced through family programs alone.

The only way to bring about substantial and sustainable reduction of fertility rates is through far-reaching social change. Such change entails more equitable systems, with policies to guarantee that the basic needs of all persons are met. Only under conditions of social justice can most people afford to have few children.

But many of the world's high level planners have little commitment to sustainable development. They are committed to the dominant development model with its so-called "free market" policies that place higher priority on economic growth for the few than on **the well-being of the many**.

They are unwilling to see how the globalisation of the market economy — with its massive debt burdens, impoverishing structural adjustment policies, increasing net flow of wealth from poor persons and poor countries to rich ones, and authoritarian puppet governments armed by imperialist powers to keep such inequities in place — is the root cause of today's global crises.

## **CAN SOCIALISM ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY?**

The environmental crisis has been caused by the capitalist model of development.

The only model which permits avoidance of over-consumption, and which aims at rational use of resources for the public good, is the socialist one.

Socialist production is not slave to the mechanisms of market economics that lead into the frenetic cycle of competition, advertising, consumerism, and waste.

Socialist production aims at satisfying needs, not over-producing commodities many of which have little relevance to real needs, and which lead to the grotesque over-use of energy.

We should remember that the Soviet Union had environmental successes, totally lost in the current media flood of stories about the failures.

For example, the Communist Party, USA points out: "... the planless suburban sprawl and vehicular air pollution that characterise U.S. cities were avoided by city planning for people, not for cars. Without the power of the auto companies which has held back mass transportation in U.S. cities, Soviet cities were able to move ahead on mass transportation. Without rapacious real estate developers they were able to plan green belts around Soviet cities.

"The indigenous people of northern Siberia, and the reindeer on which they depended, had a very different history from that of their counterparts in northern Canada."

In our earlier pamphlet, **Good Planets Are Hard To Find**, we looked at some of the reasons why the socialist community made errors which caused major environmental damage.

Five and ten year planning periods may have hindered recognition of environmental problems since they frequently take a long time to develop.

The errors sprang from the drive to meet people's needs, to rebuild after World War II, to defend socialism, from ignorance and from organisational stagnation.

Socialist failures to protect the environment are not inherent within the socialist system as they are in the capitalist system.

A planned economy which has eliminated the profit motive is a prerequisite for finding and implementing solutions to environmental problems.

Marx wrote: "Under socialism, people can regulate their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature, and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature."

**With a socialist understanding of the need to maintain sustainable ecosystems as a base for a sustainable economic system, the struggle against the exploitation of workers — the core of the struggle for socialism — can now be enriched and strengthened by the struggles against the exploitation of nature.**

## **CONCLUSION**

The achievement of sustainable development requires significant political changes.

Despite all the reforms which can be achieved, the struggle for sustainable development is in essence a struggle to restrain and restrict capitalist corporations, to compel disarmament, to compel an end to environmentally damaging production processes and to compel an end to imperialism's exploitation and distortion of Third World economies.

The capitalist ruling class is the enemy of both workers and the environment.

**Without the working class, whose very existence forces it into opposition first to the corporations and then to the capitalist system, environmentalists will never succeed in shaking the system.**

**The inclusion of environmental concerns in the working class struggle today ensures that they will become foundation stones of a socialist tomorrow.**

The pressure of the capitalist system on nature is so ingrained, so pervasive, and so severe, that it is not too much to say that it is an unnatural as well as an inhumane system.

Those who have a class interest in exploiting both workers and the environment cannot be allowed to put that interest above humanity's interest any longer.

They cannot be allowed to stand in the way of all of us who depend for our future on putting people and nature before profits.

The need for a sustainable environment is overpowering, but within this system, impossible.

However, environmental struggle **within** the system is necessary. Measures to keep the situation from worsening are urgent. Limited gains are important.

Moreover, people have to be organised around the issues as they see them and feel them, which is within the political and economic system they know.

Only by learning through experience the limitations of this struggle are they prepared to press the system to its limits and to recognise that it must be changed.

The more environmental movements develop this basic understanding, the more effective will be campaigns for immediate goals. When people believe the present system is forever, they craft their programs for what seems possible within it.

Keeping our eyes on what is necessary, rather than what is possible, is more effective even in the short run.