

Labour and climate change: towards an emancipatory ecological class consciousness¹

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To fight climate change “we need everyone”, the New York City People’s Climate March claimed, but perhaps who we need most are the workers. We need workers and their organisations, and the labour movement to be on the side of climate movements. This may sound surprising and perhaps obsolete to some because we are so used to thinking that labour does not matter. Three decades of neoliberal policies, of TINA (There Is No Alternative) discourses, and of undeniable crises in the labour movement have convinced us that labour does not really matter in politics, nor in social science, and that other subjects, other identities, other movements, need our attention.

This tendency came as a reaction to earlier obsessions with the ‘working class’, sometimes understood in rather schematic and dogmatic ways, which obscured as much as they revealed. It is time now to get back to labour, not as a pre-determined social and political identity to turn into our privileged subject, but as a fundamentally new, multiple, diversified and fluid reality. Labour organisations have been violently and thoroughly shaken by capitalist globalisation in the last three decades, and their previous political

strength – where this existed – has been successfully destroyed through class war. In fact, while we were being convinced that class struggle did not matter anymore, capital continued to fight it and won.

So why should we, political ecologists, care about labour? First, because work is the fundamental interface between society and nature. All kinds of work: productive, reproductive, service, care, intellectual and immaterial work, preside over and regulate social metabolism – the exchange of materials and energy that sustains human life. Labour is not in command of this process, however, for capital is in charge in what eco-Marxists call the second contradiction of capitalism: the relationship between capital and nature. As a result, workers are often forced to endure various kinds of unsustainable, unhealthy and ecologically destructive work, in order to obtain a wage that allows them to survive in the market economy. This second contradiction takes place in workers’ bodies, and in their working and living environments.²

But two other major factors need to be taken into account.

¹ This text is taken from a talk given on January 22, 2015 at the Autonomous University of Barcelona at the public event, “How research enters social movements,” organised by ENT Environment and Management and the European Network of Political Ecology ‘Entitle’.

² Barca, Stefania. “On Working-Class Environmentalism. A Historical and Transnational Overview.” *Interface. A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 4.2 (2012): 61-80.



As **feminist political economy** has reminded us, not all work is controlled by capital and the market. In fact, this may be only the tip of the iceberg, made up largely of non-alienated work done outside the capitalist wage-labour system including: social service sectors, household work, community or kinship, co-operatives, charity establishments, through bartering or alternative currency, and small-scale or subsistence agriculture.³

This is a promising starting point for an **ecological revolution**, i.e. a revolution in the way production, reproduction and consciousness interact with each other, as theorized by many ecofeminist and agroecology scholars and activists, who consider food autonomy as the **revolution's point zero**.⁴ Therefore, if ecology can become a platform for a new (international) labour agenda, and if labour can become a leading subject of climate mobilisation, then reverting primitive accumulation would be a good place to start. Primitive accumulation has historically led to the separation of workers from the land and the overexploitation of both. A new kind of society might be built on forms of non-alienated work that sustains and enhances

life in all its forms, thus beginning with claiming new possibilities and new identities for workers with the aim of subverting the second contradiction of capitalism. The aim is to end unsustainable and ecologically destructive work and embrace new forms of social metabolism.

It is here that the second substantial factor can enter the debate, as disturbing as it may be, whereby the socialist experiment in Eastern Europe, China, and other contexts, left a legacy of environmental destruction and injustice. The reasons for this failure lay in the fact that "existing socialism" has been mostly based on forced industrialisation, internal and external colonisation and high-modernist environmental schemes and technologies competing in "creative destruction", with those employed in capitalist regimes.

Therefore, it is not enough to replace capitalism and reduce social inequalities, because there is a need to abolish masculinist economic models, productivism, extractivism, GDP growth, war, racism, imperialism, colonialism and all that produces violence against people and their environments. The next step would

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3 Gibson-Graham, Julie-Katherine. **A Postcapitalist Politics**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2006.

4 Merchant, Carolyn. "The theoretical structure of ecological revolutions." *Environmental Review*, 11. 4 (1987): 265-74.

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be to replace them with a completely new system of production and reproduction, one based not only on equality but on respect for life in all its forms. There is no shortcut through the current system.

In order to build a new system, historical materialism states, there is a need for an organised and conscious working-class, to take the lead. But the point I want to make here is that, for the working class to become the political subject of a new system of ecological relationships, a new consciousness must come about: an ecological class-consciousness, based on a renewed, multiple process of subjectivation, capable of turning the working-class into the leading historical subject for an emancipatory, and non-oppressive, green revolution.

In order to become the subject of this ecological revolution to come, labour organisations would need to profoundly transform themselves in a way that puts ecology centre stage in their political visions and strategies. The question remains whether this shift in labour politics is possible in our world as it is now.

The next question becomes, what kind of research is needed in order to help labour movements become this new political subject? What kind of researcher one should become in order to help usher in this new reality? This would need to be a transformative and self-transformative research project. Because it is not only the labour movements that need transformation, and in fact labour does not and cannot transform itself in a social vacuum. A larger, emancipatory process of cultural change is needed that allows new solidarities

and alliances to form in order to re-claim the forgotten subject of labour outside domination/exploitation. Something of the kind that the movie *Pride* recalls: a story in which gay and lesbian activists from London link their struggle for recognition to that of the coal miners of South Wales. The story highlights the effectiveness of bypassing many cultural and communication barriers and prejudices, thus demonstrating that new kinds of politics are always possible to build, especially when people and organisations are not stuck in the infinite reiteration of 'identity'. Further, the film exemplifies transformative politics that challenge identities, and carries a stronger capacity for liberation and revolution.

After decades of neoliberal politics which have nearly defeated labour on all possible fronts, there is a need to enhance workers' potential for self-transformation into new kinds of organisations with new kinds of visions and strategies. Since we cannot build a revolution without some kind of organisation and strategy, then we should strive to forge the ones that are best suited for the fight.

Fighting climate change is a challenge where the labour movements should be on the front line because workers are already at the front line on the war against capitalism and climate change. In addition to labour movements, Indigenous Peoples, small farming communities, the unemployed, and women of all groups are at the forefront of this front line. Therefore in organising to defend themselves, they defend humanity from ecological ruin. These types of struggles require a

⁵ Bergthaller, Hannes *et al.*, "Environmental Humanities" 5 (2014): 261-276.

profound transformation of labour's traditional visions and mottos, and of those from the Left in general.

How can research be of any use to this transformation?

Telling a different story

As scholars in the **Environmental Humanities** tell us, "Human beings cannot but act on the basis of collective memories, present convictions, and anticipated futures."⁵ Therefore, there is a need to build an alternative, emancipatory, collective memory from the work/environment relationship; one that goes beyond a common-sense labour/environment conflict. This is where history can play its role by helping to unearth metaphorical 'axes of war', i.e. memories of how the labour movement has been able, throughout history, to fight against the second contradiction and renegotiate the class conflict not only in terms of wages but also in terms of re-distribution of ecological costs – at the shop-floor level as well as at the level of public health and environmental regulation benefitting society at large. The task of the researcher is to recover this history of alliances between **workers and environmentalists**, rescuing personal and collective experiences from the obliteration produced by mainstream accounts of history, and unleashing powerful counter-narratives and liberation strategies. In other words, engaged research can help to decolonise historical knowledge from neoliberal visions of 'end of history' and TINA, where occupational blackmail is a very central argument.



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Offering instruments for building new kinds of organisations

In the past two decades, activist research in communication, information and communication technology and social networking has played a crucial role in transforming ways and possibilities of organising, through the **Peer 2 Peer movement** and **Social Network Unionism** in general. These resources do not create a direct bargaining power, but enhance strategic visions and campaigning power; virtual unionism cannot replace local or national unionism, but can help it in self-transformation and building strength.



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New forms of labour organising and networking in research/activism also include open-access publications, such as the journal **Interface** or for example, the magazine **Roar**. These new instruments have been helping to transform labour movements in the direction towards incorporat-

ing ecological issues, and especially in forging new alliances. Further, they have been crucial in creating the preconditions for a convergence between climate and labour politics. Some examples include the **Blue-Green Alliance** in North America, and the **One Million Climate Jobs Campaign** in South Africa. These new coalitions have been producing visible results, testified by the massive presence of trade-union organisations at the People's Climate March in NYC, for example, and by the incorporation of climate change issues within the agenda of the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) and of the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO).

Naturally, this is a complex, non-linear process of internal transformation, made up of different and sometimes contrasting components, which often encounters resistance from within. This is where political ecology research could enter the labour movement, as a perspective and an approach to understanding conflicts and struggles originated by ecological contradictions. Notably, these contradictions often enter the labour movement and divide it along various lines including: the local/national/global divide, the gender

divide, the North/South divide, the specialised/unskilled labour divide, the urban/rural divide, along with several types of ideological and identity divides.

Fighting climate change thus means different things to different trade unions. For the ITUC and ILO, it has meant adopting a "green jobs" strategy based on an Environmental Economics approach and advocating green growth. For anti-system-based unions such as the Spanish **Solidaridad Obrera**, it means a much more radical "green revolution" agenda, advocating for reduced working hours, re-commoning public services, reducing unnecessary material and energy consumption, re-localising production, democratic control of the economy, decentralised energy systems, and the union's participation in anti-fracking and similar mobilisations at the grassroots local level.

Political Ecology research must engage with these internal contradictions of labour/climate politics, and try to make sense of them by opening the black box of the "labour" subject. Some ways to do this start with understanding differences and shifting identities, criticising bureaucratic leaderships, taking a stance with certain specific visions and struggles within the movement, in order to usher in the desired transformations. There is a lot of new work to be done here, as well as new methods and tools with which to experiment and invent. The only thing that political ecologists need to avoid is looking away and ignoring labour, either because they think it is not relevant, or because they feel impotent to face its many weaknesses and limitations, and thus *de facto* reinforce the idea that there is no alternative to its current state of demise.