

The “Ecosocialist” conference in New York

A fraudulent campaign for “climate justice”

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The recent announcement by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that carbon dioxide levels as measured from Hawaii’s Mauna Loa volcano have exceeded 400 parts per million, most likely the highest level in three million years, is the latest and most dramatic proof of global warming that is being propelled by human activity.

Despite the disastrous toll caused by extreme weather events, capitalist governments around the world have been incapable of addressing, let alone reversing, the growth of greenhouse gases. In the US, Obama—hailed as the “environmental president” by various Democratic Party aligned groups—has proven to be nothing but a shill for the energy conglomerates, protecting BP during the worst ecological disaster in US history and blocking any environmental regulations on big corporations.

Along with the eruption of militarism, the explosive growth of social inequality and ever-greater attacks on the social and democratic rights of the masses of working people, the failure by world governments to halt the destruction of the environment is an indictment of capitalism.

The “Ecosocialist Conference” held at Barnard College in New York City—chiefly sponsored by the International Socialist Organization and the Green Party—was an attempt to block any independent movement of the working class against a potential environmental catastrophe.

Anyone not familiar with the politics of these organizations would get the impression from the “anti-capitalist” rhetoric in the promotional material that the conference would propose a radical or even socialist program to oppose global warming. This could not be further from the case.

The term “ecosocialism” has been utilized by various pseudo-left groups in Europe to align themselves with social democratic, ex-Stalinist, Green and other bourgeois parties. Its proponents not only reject the Marxist conception of the revolutionary role of the working class, they blame workers’ supposed obsession with consumerism for ecological problems and advocate a program of austerity.

At the open plenary session, Richard Smith, a writer described as an “independent socialist,” declared, “If Obama really wanted to cut CO2 emissions, he could simply ask Americans to stop consuming so much oil, crush their SUVs, shut off their air conditioners, stop taking cruise ship vacations and jetting off to Cancun.”

Chris Williams, a leading member of the ISO, complained that “capitalist alienation” means, “basic human fulfillment can be achieved if I can get more things. This has distorted our lives—we have no idea of what it means to be fully human...What do we mean by a good standard of living—the accumulation of more things, more stuff.”

Like so many anti-Marxists before him, Williams deliberately distorts the meaning of the concept “alienation,” which Marx, the founder of scientific socialism, developed in his early writings to express the separation of the worker from the products of his labor and the loss of any control of his life under capitalism, a social relation that could only be overcome if workers seized the means of production.

Instead, according to Williams, it is a psychological state that can be overcome by convincing workers that they will become “more human” if only they accept a drastic reduction in their conditions of life. Such an argument dovetails with the program of austerity being imposed by every capitalist government in the world, from Greece and Spain to the United States.

In a pointed display of the anti-working class character of the conference, union bureaucrats who are experts in reducing the consumption of the working class were invited to speak on one panel discussion entitled, “Natural Allies: Labor and Climate Justice Movements.”

The panel included Bruce Hamilton, an international vice-president of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which earlier this year carried out the betrayal of the month-long strike of nearly 9,000 New York City school bus drivers and escorts against the attack on job security and wages. Hamilton bragged about certain “green” policies of the ATU, making sure to explain, “the leadership took the lead and brought the membership along.”

This, the first “ecosocialism” conference held in the US, according to its organizers, served to reestablish the close relations between the Greens and the ISO, which have been courting one another for a decade and half. Each in their own way, the Greens and ISO both function as auxiliary organizations of the Democratic Party.

The Greens are a party of the upper-middle class seeking to gain some level of influence within the corporate and political establishment, chiefly to defend their own lifestyle concerns, though with a traditional focus on environmental reform. They base themselves on acceptance of the capitalist system. As one of the speakers, Gloria Mattera, a former Green candidate in New York State, declared, “I would be the first to admit that the Green Party is not an anti-capitalist party.”

Once in power, the Greens have proven loyal defenders of capitalist property and imperialism. In Germany, for example, where the Greens joined a coalition government with the Social Democrats, they defended the interests of big business, dropped their pacifist claims and supported the launching of wars against Yugoslavia and Afghanistan on behalf of German imperialism. In France, they allied themselves with the Socialist Party supporting austerity demands and bowing to the nuclear energy lobby.

In the US, the Green Party’s political perspective has been to pressure the Democratic Party from the outside, a position shared by the ISO. The ISO supported Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader in 2000. They supported Nader again in 2004 when he ran as an independent, even as he joined right-wing politician Pat Buchanan in denouncing “illegal aliens” from Mexico and offered himself as a semi-official advisor to Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. In 2006, the ISO supported so-called “left Greens,” such as California gubernatorial candidate Peter Camejo and US Senate candidate Howie Hawkins in New York, and ran its own member Todd Chretien as a Green in the race for US Senate in California.

In 2008, however, the ISO effectively threw itself behind the Obama campaign, utilizing its own stock-in-trade identity politics to help the Democratic Party promote the lie that the election of the first African American president would lead to a fundamental change. Under conditions of the increasing discrediting of Obama—after four years of Wall Street bank bailouts, attacks on workers and escalation of criminal wars and attacks on democratic rights—the ISO gave tepid support to Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein in 2012, while insisting that protests “from below” could shift Obama to the left in his second term.

ISO leader Chris Williams reasserted this lie at the conference, insisting the Obama administration could be pressured to “slow down the capitalist death train that is

leading us over the carbon cliff.”

The New York City event was apparently conceived after the February 17 “Forward on Climate” protest in Washington, DC, with the ISO and Greens joining together to urge Obama to oppose Keystone XL pipeline project.

In her remarks to the conference, Stein said of the ISO, “We discovered that we had so much in common as political organizations.” This is true.

Like the Greens in Europe, the ISO is also deeply involved in the intrigues of US imperialism, promoting the US State Department’s line against Syria—by claiming the Islamic fundamentalist-led sectarian war backed by the US and its Gulf allies is really a popular “revolution”—and preparing the way for another neo-colonial “human rights” war by the Obama administration.

Under conditions of growing opposition to the Obama administration from the working class, the ISO is seeking to unite with the Greens with the aim of blocking any break with the Democratic Party, while hoping to attain the beloved “political space” in the capitalist state that their European counterparts already enjoy.

In either case, the ISO functions as nothing more than the “left” flank of the American capitalist political establishment.

A genuine fight against the destruction of the environment—and against war, social inequality and the attack on democratic rights—requires the building of a politically independent movement of the working class, based on an international and socialist program. Such a fight requires a systematic exposure of the hostile class interests represented by the ISO, the Greens and other pseudo-left organizations.



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