

The working class and the environmental crisis

Patrick Martin
19 December 2018

Perhaps the stupidest slander among the many hurled at the Yellow Vest movement in France by the corporate media is the claim that the workers involved in militant protests over social inequality, poverty and low-wage jobs are opposed to environmental concerns because they balked at the gas tax imposed by President Emmanuel Macron.

The *New York Times*, which has regularly circulated such smears, carried an op-ed column in its Sunday edition under the headline, “Is Environmentalism Just for Rich People?” Written by Dr. Neil Gross, a professor of sociology at Colby College in Maine, the column claims that the Yellow Vest protests “are making environmentalists nervous” and praises Macron’s gas tax as “part of an ongoing ambitious effort to combat global warming.”

Gross directly compares the Yellow Vests to workers in the United States: “As with working class support for the faltering coal industry in the United States, the question arises: Is environmentalism a boutique issue, a cause only the well-off can afford to worry about?” He cites a supposedly “landmark” 1995 sociological study showing that support for environmentalism is strongest in the higher income brackets, because “citizens were apt to prioritize environmental concerns only if they were rich enough not to have to fret about more basic things like food and shelter.”

Rising economic inequality only exacerbates the problem, Gross maintains, arguing that “in many of today’s capitalist democracies, class and status resentments, fostered by rampant inequality and whipped up by opportunistic politicians, have developed to such an extent that issues like the environment that affect everyone are increasingly seen through the lens of group conflict and partisan struggle.”

A class-conscious movement of the working class (i.e., one that views issues “through the lens of group conflict”), must therefore by definition be hostile to environmental concerns that “affect everyone.” While Gross is clearly hostile to right-wing populists like Donald Trump and Marine le Pen, he essentially echoes their arguments that protecting the environment and protecting workers’ jobs and living standards are incompatible goals.

Gross ignores the obvious fact that the measures proposed by the Macron government do not “affect everyone,” and certainly not equally. They slash the living standards of working people in the name of reducing fossil fuel consumption, while Macron lavishes tax cuts, business deregulation and other favors on the corporate elite.

A second column in the *Times* on Monday is more openly reactionary, to the point of seeming absurdity. Professor Todd May, a professor of philosophy at Clemson University in South Carolina, poses the question in his headline: “Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?” May argues that this appalling suggestion is a valid one and an active subject of discussion in bourgeois philosophical circles.

Why? Because “we are devastating the earth and causing unimaginable animal suffering,” which presumably justifies the extermination of seven billion human beings and their descendants. May concludes that “if the planet no longer contained human beings... it might just be a good thing.”

The professor argues that the entire human race is guilty of crimes against nature: “It is humanity that is committing a wrong, a wrong whose elimination would likely require the elimination of the species...” The wrong includes the human contribution to climate change, the encroachment of human activity on various

ecosystems and the development of factory-farming methods in agriculture that foster “the creation of millions upon millions of animals for whom it offers nothing but suffering and misery before slaughtering them in often barbaric ways.”

May concedes that humanity has made valuable contributions such as the development of reason, art and science, and admits, “Were our species to go extinct, all of that would be lost.” However, he then launches into an argument founded on equating human and animal lives, posing what he apparently regards as an unanswerable question, “[H]ow much suffering and death of nonhuman life would we be willing to countenance to save Shakespeare, our sciences and so forth?” He answers, “Unless we believe there is such a profound moral gap between the status of human and nonhuman animals, whatever reasonable answer we come up with will be well surpassed by the harm and suffering we inflict upon animals.”

At the risk of an accusation of “species-ism,” it has to be said that the May column calling for the death penalty for humanity for its cruelty to animals would appear more suited to the *Onion* than to the *New York Times*. But this dismal product of the academic sanctum is a serious warning of the political disorientation of sections of the upper-middle class under conditions of mounting class conflict within capitalism. Both columns, by May and Gross, are demonstrations of the literal dead end arrived at by thinking limited to the socio-economic framework of the profit system.

It is not “humanity” that is guilty of contributing to climate change or the destruction of the ecosystem, as May claims. It is the capitalist class, which controls the world economy and determines its activities and development, including its impact on the environment. Nor is it the case, as Gross argues, that seeing issues “through the lens of group conflict” blocks the development of solutions to an environmental crisis that affects the entire planet. On the contrary, only a perspective based on the independent political mobilization of the working class offers a way forward.

The inability of capitalism and the nation-state system to resolve the climate crisis was on display over the past two weeks in Katowice, Poland, the site of yet another UN-sponsored climate summit. The representatives of more than 200 governments, including 25,000 bureaucrats, scientists and diplomats,

could not even agree to endorse a report on the looming dangers of global warming, let alone take any serious action to forestall it.

They adopted a meaningless rulebook to implement the Paris climate agreement, which climate scientists regard as completely inadequate. This was done to preserve the pretense of international unity, under conditions where the Trump administration has already announced its intention to withdraw from the Paris accord next year, the earliest date at which it can legally do so.

The unspoken premise of all discussion of the environment by the capitalist class and its representatives is that to stop climate change, the working class has to suffer. But why should workers have to pay for the criminality, incompetence and nationalistic pig-headedness of the capitalist ruling elites?

The crisis of climate change underscores the deadly consequences of the anarchic and unplanned character of capitalist production, driven by profit and the strategic interests of the most powerful capitalist nation states. Far from environmental degradation being the responsibility of “everyone,” the 2017 Carbon Majors Report showed that 70 percent of all greenhouse gases released from 1988 to 2015 came from just 100 companies, all of which are controlled by multimillionaires and billionaires in the capitalist classes of the major countries.

The only realistic response to the environmental crisis is a socialist one: the nationalization of the giant corporations and banks under workers’ control, the institution of scientific planning of the world economy, and the abolition of capitalism and the nation-state system.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact