Climate change and the fight for socialism

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (UK)
15 February 2019

The strike by thousands of school students across the UK, protesting government inaction over climate change, is a powerful indication of the growing concern among the young generation over the future of the planet.

Organized by the UK Youth Climate Coalition in more than 50 cities and towns, it is part of an international series of protests, building towards a worldwide day of action on March 15.

Last November, at least 15,000 school students protested throughout Australia, followed by 4,000 students in Switzerland in December. In Belgium and Germany tens of thousands have rallied, while protests in France coinciding with the Yellow Vest demonstrations have seen upward of 70,000 students take part nationally. Students are planning similar action in the United States, Thailand and Uganda to join the March 15 global day of action.

These student strikes express the politicization of a generation that has come of age in a world of brutal austerity, social inequality, imperialist war, persecution of refugees and the tearing up of democratic rights.

The school strikes in Britain have provoked a vicious right-wing backlash, with Conservative politicians and newspapers insisting pupils stay in school. But the students' fight has galvanized support among teachers and academics. More than 200, including 100 professors, signed a letter to the *Guardian* professing "solidarity with the children going on school climate strike on 15 February, and with all those taking a stand for the future of the planet" and the "many other striking students all around the world… making their voices heard."

That climate change threatens the future of humanity is beyond doubt. According to the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in which 91 scientists from 41 countries cooperated, global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels will have catastrophic consequences. It would lead to food shortages, melt the ice cap of the Arctic Ocean, increase the number of weather catastrophes and cause economic damage anywhere between $54 and $69 trillion worldwide.

A recent report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) warns, "...environmental breakdown could trigger catastrophic breakdown of human systems, driving a rapid process of 'runaway collapse' in which economic, social and political shocks cascade through the globally linked system—in much the same way as occurred in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-08."

One tragic consequence of climate change is the forced displacement of hundreds of millions of people. According to the United Nations, approximately 210 million people globally have been forced to flee their homes as a result of extreme weather or droughts since 2008.

The destructive effects of climate change—from floods to forest fires and droughts—are exacerbated by social inequality and the underfunding of vital infrastructure. Instead of helping vulnerable communities, society's resources are handed to the super rich or squandered on vast militaries and weapons stockpiles that threaten an even graver global catastrophe—the nuclear annihilation of human civilization.

Popular slogans such as, "There is no planet B," "This is OUR future" and "Respect Existence or Expect Resistance" —speak to a widespread understanding of the existential threat to humanity and a belief that society must change.

The global character of the student strikes and protests has fundamental significance. Young people are organising across national boundaries in recognition that climate change has global causes and global consequences. In doing so, they are meeting up with an international resurgence of the class struggle.

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Millions of workers across the planet are joining strikes and protests to defend their wages, living standards and basic rights. Mass teacher walkouts have erupted in the US, UK, Zimbabwe and India. Ryanair pilots and cabin crew have struck across five European countries and Amazon workers across six, in a direct rebellion against the nationalist, pro-company trade unions. The yellow vest, the symbol of mass protests in France against President Emmanuel Macron's pro-business austerity, has been adopted by protesters in Belgium, Sudan and many other countries.

It is to this international social force, the working class, that students must turn in their fight against climate change. The destruction of the planet by corporate polluters, including the fossil fuel industry, cannot be stopped through appeals to governments or their parliamentary "opponents."

The UK Student Climate Network calls on the Conservative government to lead a fight to protect "life on Earth, taking active steps to achieve climate justice." But all the major parties—from the Conservatives and Labour in the UK, to the Republicans and Democrats in the US—are committed to defending the capitalist system of production.

In this context, Labour's plans for a "Green Transformation," like the US Democrats' "Green New Deal," can only end as footnotes to the hundreds of other broken promises on the environment made by parties and governments beholden to the rich.

The top 100 companies that produce 71 percent of the planet's carbon emissions have infinitely more say on government policy than the world's working class and youth. Governments across the world have failed to meet even the minimal emissions targets set by the Paris Agreement in 2015. According to the IPCC, catastrophic climate change can now be averted only by transforming the world economy in a way that has "no documented historic precedent."

The urgent measures needed to combat climate change come into conflict with two basic contradictions of the world capitalist system: the contradiction between a global economy and its division into rival nation-states, and between socialized production and the subordination of economic life to the accumulation of private profit.

As long as a handful of billionaires dominate society, with every aspect of economic life geared to their personal enrichment, not a single social problem, including climate change, can be solved. What is a required is a political struggle for socialism, making possible the organisation of production on a global scale, democratically and scientifically planned to meet the essential needs of this and future generations.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fights for this programme on an international scale. As the youth organization of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, we fight to unify workers and youth against capitalism, militarism, exploitation and oppression.

We urge young people attending today's demonstrations to join the IYSSE and fight to build a socialist movement in the youth and working class, the only social force capable of overthrowing capitalism and building a socialist society worldwide.

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