

Extinction Rebellion: “Green” capitalism versus world socialism

Steve James
14 March 2019

The ongoing school and college student strikes against climate change are proof of how a new generation is being politically radicalised because of their concern for the future of the Earth and of humanity.

This Friday’s Strike Global for Future protest will see thousands of young people, including striking school students, take to the streets in 92 countries and over 1,200 cities and towns, angry at how giant corporations and governments are ignoring warnings that global warming threatens catastrophic famine, forced mass migration, fires and floods. An entire generation is coming to realise that the world is being imperilled by the uncontrollable, ceaseless, and rapacious drive for profit.

Only the most extraordinary, rationally planned mobilisation of humanity’s immense productive, technical and scientific capacities can hope to overcome the challenges of rapidly rising sea levels, accelerating CO2 emissions, loss of biodiversity, collapse of food chains and desertification. But production under capitalism is directed solely to expand the private wealth of billionaires, regardless of the social or environmental cost.

Moreover, climate change by its very nature demands a global response in which production is subordinated to the needs of the world’s working population. But the world is divided into competing nation states, each dominated by the selfish interests of rival groups of super rich profiteers. Each continually seek strategic trade and military advantage over their rivals in the struggle to dominate the world’s market as resources, and each continually seek new means of extracting more from the working class. As it has twice in the 20th century, this ferocious conflict ends ultimately in world war—threatening the nuclear destruction of the planet.

Climate change, therefore, confronts humanity with the need for the socialist reorganisation of society on a world scale and the abolition of the nation-state system.

The youth climate protests, combined with escalating class struggles worldwide that are driven by extreme social inequality, create the conditions for large numbers of people to draw precisely this conclusion. This is why a host of media, political and academic figures have been mobilised to argue that no level of environmental calamity can justify hostility to capitalism itself. Whatever organisations and protests emerge,

they must be directed along acceptable channels.

The UK based Extinction Rebellion (XR) was launched in October last year by a small group of environmentalists called Rising Up and was supported by an open letter from 94 academics. Rising Up’s most prominent figure is Roger Hallam, an organic farmer, PhD researcher and opponent of a third runway at Heathrow airport. But it has been provided with major supportive news coverage in liberal publications such as the *Guardian*.

XR presents itself as a novel combination of urgent environmental demands, international organisation and democratic-sounding decentralisation. Anyone concerned about climate change can get involved. Its website’s front page aims at the sincere and politically inexperienced: “We are facing an unprecedented global emergency. The government has failed to protect us. To survive, it’s going to take everything we’ve got,” the slogan states—without explaining what “everything” means.

The site links to XR groups in 13 countries, a signup form and a world map showing XR groups. Many of these are Facebook pages linking to training sessions and local events that are part of worldwide days of action.

The academics’ letter declares, “[W]e will not tolerate the failure of this or any other government to take robust and emergency action in respect of the worsening ecological crisis.” The 94 professed a “moral duty to bypass the government’s inaction and flagrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself.”

For all the urgency and novel presentation involved, XR is a rebranding exercise for a strategy and the political forces associated with it that has singly failed to reverse the degradation of the planet. XR propose the same model of capitalism with a green environmental tinge, backed up with protests, promoted by successive Green and similar parties worldwide.

A second letter in support of XR attracted signatories including the great and good of the Green and pseudo-left establishment such as Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, Rowan Williams, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, former Ecology Party leader Sir Jonathan Porrit, Labour Party MP David Drew, and Green MP and former Green Party leader, Caroline Lucas.

One of XR's leading supporters is the *Guardian* environmental columnist George Monbiot. The *Guardian*, which loses no opportunity to slander heroes of journalism and democracy such as Wikileaks' founder Julian Assange, has happily allowed Monbiot to deploy his column space in support of XR.

Universally, when in power, the Greens have acted as ruthless defenders of their own ruling class, most notably in Germany where they have imposed austerity and war mongering policies. Such "Green" policies as have been pursued invariably service the interests of a wealthy layer of the upper-middle class, along with allied "green" capitalists and entrepreneurs who embrace environmentalism to establish dominance in niche markets and to "ethically" (i.e., for the most part cynically) rebrand foodstuffs and various major consumer durables.

Meanwhile, despite ever more urgent scientific warnings, international emissions agreements, global warming targets and protocols are ignored by governments and corporations alike. Yet, XR continues to claim that local and national governments and business leaders can be pressured into making piecemeal changes that will alleviate environmental collapse.

While advocating various forms of localism in production and political organisation alike, XR seeks to bolster the authority of national governments and to portray them as potential allies against global corporations. Governments should "tell the truth about the climate and wider ecological emergency, reverse inconsistent policies and work alongside the media to communicate with citizens," states XR. But why would governments tell the truth when they lie daily on the most fundamental questions facing working people?

XR demands "legally binding policy measures to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 and to reduce consumption levels."

Whose consumption levels are to be reduced is not explained. But invariably green politics promote "anti-consumerism," which views aspirations to the necessities of modern life as unacceptable and blames the working class for wanting "too much unnecessary stuff."

The XR website "Principles and Values" page carefully avoids any criticism of capitalism. XR intends "To spark and sustain a spirit of creative rebellion, which will enable much needed changes in our political, economic and social landscape."

Its aim is to "support and encourage a citizens' uprising in the UK (of about 2 million people) involving low level and higher risk acts of civil disobedience," with the goal of "a participatory, democratic process that discusses and improves a draft manifesto for change and a new constitution."

The "change" they seek ends up as minor constitutional tinkering to be implemented by the ruling class, chivvied on by sections of the upper-middle class.

XR pledge to back up their demands with "non-violent direct action." In November last year, 85 people were arrested when thousands occupied bridges in Central London. This month, XR

supporters in Edinburgh protested an oil industry conference at the National Museum of Scotland. 13 peaceful demonstrators were arrested. One day later, 400 protesters poured hundreds of litres of red paint over Downing Street to represent the "death of our children."

For all the apparent radicalism and commitment to international organisation, XR's pro-capitalist politics inevitably brings into alliance with its own ruling class' trade and military war preparations. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Labour MP and XR supporter Alex Sobel called for a new Marshall Plan for the UK and Europe to drive a "programme of rapid de-carbonisation [that] will help us become a leader in zero-carbon tech."

His reference to the Marshall Plan, when US wealth was directed to reviving capitalism in Europe after World War II, is significant. His proposal, shared by XR, offers the European energy and auto industries a means to kick start their competitive struggle to dominate the world's electric car and renewable energy markets.

The second open letter in support of XR, published in December, was also reprinted in the *Guardian*. It demanded that "international political organisations and national governments must foreground the climate-emergency issue immediately" and impoverished nations should be compensated for "foregoing unsustainable economic growth."

In other words, the wealthiest countries should be able to retain their dominant world position—and the upper-middle classes their own very comfortable lives—by preventing further economic development in the oppressed nations. Such measures as carbon emissions trading already do this.

Youth should reject this bankrupt and selfish outlook with contempt and dedicate themselves to the struggle for a socialist world that would guarantee a decent life for all the world's people—without threatening global extinction.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact