Eight billion people on Earth: A milestone for humanity

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On November 15, 2022, approximately 367,000 women gave birth around the world. Among these newborns, according to statistical projections by the United Nations, was the eight billionth person alive now on Earth. The UN estimate noted that it had taken 12 years, since the global population passed the seven billion mark, to add another billion human beings.

The rapid growth of the world's population is one of the central features of modern history.

It took the entirety of human existence until 1804, according to demographic estimates, for the world to reach the one billion milestone. Even at that point, despite some technical development, mainly in Europe, life expectancy remained abysmal in every region of the world. Infant mortality was so high and reaching old age so rare that life expectancy at birth is estimated to have been barely 30 years.

High childhood mortality and death from infectious diseases were major impediments to a longer life and consequently population growth was slow, despite a far higher birth rate than today. It would take another 123 years before two billion people inhabited the planet in 1927. The third billion took only 33 years and the fourth billion 14 years more, circa 1974. The population reached five billion in 1987, six billion in 1999 and seven billion in 2010.

The latest billion suggests, paradoxically, the beginning of a slowdown, as it required 12 years, more than the 11 years to reach seven billion, even though the number of women in their child-bearing years had increased. With the availability of contraception and the assurance that their children will live to maturity, women and their partners can be selective as to when to have children.

If one looks at those numbers by a different yardstick, it took 123 years (1804 to 1927) for the world's population to double from one to two billion. The next doubling, to four billion, took 47 years. The next doubling, to eight billion, took 48 years, a year longer. Demographers agree that the period of rapid doubling is now over since the drop in the birth rate that follows the fall in infant mortality has now reached every corner of the world. Their expectation is that population growth will level off at around 10 billion.

Marxism vs. Malthusianism

Marxists view the increase in the numbers of the human race as a tremendous positive, made possible by advances in scientific knowledge, productive technique and public health, and the extension of these to virtually every country in the world.

We categorically reject the moaning and handwringing of the neo-Malthusians, who decry population growth as the root of all evil, and particularly blame it for the climate crisis and other environmental catastrophes. In our view, these are caused by unplanned capitalist anarchy, not "overpopulation."

One such commentary appeared in the *New York Times* on November 13, in an op-ed column by Thomas Homer-Dixon and Johan Rockström, academic researchers from Canada and Germany. They identified a confluence of multiple crises—war, pandemic, runaway inflation, environmental collapse—and pessimistically declared that these crises are a result of two factors: "the magnitude of humanity's resource consumption" and the "vastly greater connectivity" of the modern world, due to the internet and improvements in transportation and telecommunications.

The column is upside-down in its presentation. The two factors it identifies, the growth of the productive forces and globalization, are indeed the driving forces of the deepening social crisis. But they are the harbingers of global decay only within the framework of the profit system and the capitalist nation-state. Freed from that straitjacket by a socialist revolution carried out by the working class, both factors would have an entirely positive significance.

What would the authors propose? A return to a more constricted scale of production and more isolated and parochial social intercourse would be an enormous and unprecedented historical regression, one that could only take place in the aftermath of world war and societal collapse.

The growth of the working class

There is another positive aspect of the expansion of the world's population. It is associated, not accidentally, with another demographic shift of enormous importance: the growth of cities, and of the working class. Both are the product of the growth of agricultural productivity, as industrialized, capitalist relations displaced more primitive and backward forms of production, first in the West, then in the East.

Hundreds of millions of peasants and agricultural laborers, displaced from tiny plots of land or large estates, have flooded into the cities searching for work, swelling the ranks of the proletariat, and thereby creating new battalions in the class struggle that will finally put an end to capitalism and establish a world socialist society.

Across the planet, there are now more than 500 cities that are home to more than one million people, accounting for 23 percent of the world's population. There are at least 31 megacities that have populations of more than 10 million people. Only recently and for the first time in human history has the majority of the world's population lived in urban environments. By 2030, this number is expected to reach 60 percent. The implication here is that most of the world's population is now proletarian, with all the class distinctions and antagonisms that define conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie.

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In this regard, it bears listing in brief the immense productive capacity of the laboring class. In the last century workers have paved more than 40 million miles of roads that transport goods and services from any one point to another. They have built a global automotive manufacturing industry whose revenue for 2021 stood at 2.86 trillion in US dollars. Worldwide, there were 26.3 million commercial vehicles sold last year.

Domestic and international flights numbered 22.2 million in 2021. Around 55,000 merchant ships set sail on the oceans to engage in international trade. In five decades, energy supply has risen by 2.6 times to 606 exajoules, or 105 billion barrels of oil equivalent, according to the International Energy Agency. All this is the product of the labor of the working class.

In 2020, the world produced 761 million metric tonnes of wheat. But over the last two decades, the increasing demand for food products has led to a 15 percent rise in world combined harvest area to 1,000 million hectares for feed grains, oilseed and food grains. To compensate for the large land conversion and food price inflation, research into enhancing multiple cropping and yield growth requires the immediate attention of policy makers. Technologies now exist to increase food production even further, including plant breeding and genome editing, as well as systems to monitor crop yields and develop better agricultural machinery.

These figures are but a glimpse into the productive capacity of the working class. They do not even begin to reflect the diversity and industry of people everywhere that give shape and substance to their life and culture. Indeed, the international working class may speak 7,100 different languages, but workers have in common the desires and hopes for their future and those of their families and friends.

They are also connected socially via the internet, with approximately five billion active users who rely on the technology for their news, work and social interactions, which include communication, education and entertainment. Last year, 190 million new users joined social media, equating to an annualized growth rate of 4.2 percent. Typical users visit an average of 7.2 different social platforms and spend on average two to three hours a day (or 15 percent of their waking day) on these media. All told, the world spends 10 billion hours using social platforms each day. In short, the world is highly interconnected in a more dynamic manner than ever before.

What is also clear is that the majority of those living on Earth are quite young. The median age of the world's population stands at 30. At present, half of the world's population is between the age of 25 and 65, that is, of working age. A quarter are younger than 14 years.

The new threats to life expectancy

Life expectancy improved remarkably throughout the 20th century, despite the world wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 in which more than 100 million died, or such harrowing events as the Great Depression. Scientific development, particularly in medicine and food production, proceeded apace, despite, and even in some cases under the impetus of, the wartime mobilizations.

The list of improvements in medicine is long: anesthetics, antiseptic techniques and surgical innovations, and blood transfusions. Ambulance services and emergency medical systems, developed during World War I, now are integral parts of daily life. Modern emergency medicine departments evolved out of experiences in triaging combat casualties during the Vietnam war.

The discovery of sulfa drugs and penicillin antibiotics in the 1930s was critical in the rapid decline of infectious disease, which was still the leading cause of death worldwide. Vaccination drastically reduced the impact of previously deadly diseases, and even eradicated smallpox, one of the most feared infections.

As the graph from *Our World in Data* indicates, the rise in life expectancy over the last century-and-a-half has been uneven, first favoring European countries and North America, the initial centers of capitalist development.

The Russian Revolution and the victory of the Bolsheviks had a great impact on the rise of life expectancy across the globe over the intervening decades. Many of the reforms and social programs that were implemented worldwide were largely a response of the imperialist powers to the threat posed by the international working class.

Life expectancy continued to rise, to more than 70 years of age by the mid-1970s. By then, even lower-income nations were seeing gains, especially during the second half of the 20th century.

Even at its high point, however, the class divisions in capitalist society were reflected in health outcomes. A report in the *British Medical Journal* from 2021 bears quoting:

> Socioeconomic inequity in mortality has been widely discussed. A large multicohort study with 1.7 million participants from the US, Europe, and Australia found that low socioeconomic status (SES) was associated with a 26 percent higher risk of mortality and 2.1 years of life lost between ages 40 and 85 years, and low SES might respectively contribute to 15.3 and 18.9 percent of deaths among women and men. From 2001 to 2014, longevity increased by 2.34 and 2.91 years, respectively, among the wealthiest five percent of US men and women, whereas only 0.32 and 0.04 years among the poorest five percent of US men and women. Similar trends were also observed in the UK, or when high education levels were compared with low education levels. Our analysis confirmed the socioeconomic disparity in mortality and extended the findings to coronary vascular disease morbidity and mortality.

In the US, the growing gap in life expectancy by income has been documented in multiple studies which have shown that for both men and women the gap between the highest and lowest quintile is upwards of 12 to 14 years, with the wealthiest reaching life expectancies in the high 80s or low 90s.

The coronavirus pandemic hit at a point where these socioeconomic factors had already produced a significant slowdown in gains in life expectancy, which is perhaps the most fundamental measurement of the progress of a society.

The policy of deliberately allowing the pandemic to spread—a form of social murder—prevented a swift end to the COVID pandemic. Global life expectancy has declined by two full years, wiping out more than a decade of improvement. The brunt of this impact was felt by the poorest and those living in low-income countries.

This was a byproduct of the various iterations of the "cure can't be worse than the disease" policies adopted by almost every country in the world against eliminating the coronavirus. In short, the gains made in the course of 150 years of public health endeavors, which have given the world's population such a tremendous gain in lifespan, have been subordinated to the accumulation of profits.

Some conclusions

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Commenting on the new population estimate, United Nations Secretary General António Guterres remarked that the eight billion figure represented “a testament to scientific breakthroughs and improvements in nutrition, public health and sanitation.”

In the same breath, he warned, “Billions of people are struggling; hundreds of millions are facing hunger and even famine. Record numbers are on the move seeking opportunities and relief from debt and hardships, wars and climate disasters. Unless we bridge the yawning chasm between the global haves and have-nots, we are setting ourselves up for an eight-billion-strong world filled with tensions and mistrust, crisis and conflict.”

He was referring to the immense inequalities that define life under capitalism in its terminal decay, with a handful of billionaires controlling as much wealth as the poorest half on the planet. While the top one percent have stuffed their bank accounts and investment portfolios with one-fifth of the world’s income, those living in high income countries can expect to live upwards of 30 years more than those in the poorest.

There are, of course, immense differences between conditions of life for the masses in the advanced capitalist countries and in the most oppressed countries and regions of the world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. It is precisely those regions in which population growth will be concentrated in the coming decades, according to UN projections.

More than half of the projected 1.7 billion global population increase by 2050 will occur in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and Tanzania. In these countries, urbanization is transforming society rapidly, while intensifying the social crisis of hunger, new (and old) diseases, declining literacy and rising child mortality and poverty, heightening social anger and tensions.

There too, however, the intervention of the working class as an independent political force will be decisive. Only the reorganization of the world economy and the development of these regions as part of an interconnected, globalized world society, in which living standards and public health facilities are raised to an equal level, offer a way forward for the great mass of humanity.

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