# New movement, new debates: The contested politics of climate change

**SARAH GARNHAM**

“A few weeks before the koala – nicknamed Lewis – was euthanized, the newly reelected prime minister took his advocacy for coal to a new level. He pledged to outlaw environmental demonstrations, calling the protests a ‘new breed of radical activism’ that is ‘apocalyptic in tone.’ One month later, a *Sydney Morning Herald* headline described conditions in Australia’s most iconic city as ‘apocalyptic,’ as residents choked in a smoky haze from bush fires. A coalition of doctors and climate researchers declared it a public health emergency.”

*Washington Post*[[1]](#endnote-2)

Concern about climate change has been increasing for years; it has gradually moved up the ratings of issues people are most worried about. But over the course of 2019, it accelerated sharply. The Scanlon Foundation’s Mapping Social Cohesion Survey of 2019 registers a doubling in the number of people who name climate change as the issue that most concerns them, the biggest jump for any issue since the survey began 12 years ago.[[2]](#endnote-3) At the same time, we saw a surge of anti-climate change activism across Australia, and around the world. It is now widely accepted not only that climate change is real, but that we are in the midst of an emergency which demands a response. Nothing underscores this more than the fires which raged across Australia for months beginning in September 2019. Climate chaos is upon us.

Few still question that human intervention has led to this disaster. There is now a scientific consensus that the Holocene is over and that we are now living through a new epoch, the Anthropocene. Beginning between 1945 and 1950, the Anthropocene describes the qualitative altering of the Earth System as a result of human activity. More specifically, it is a product of capitalism. Marxist writer Ian Angus, author of *Facing the Anthropocene*, explains this process:

Capitalism has driven the Earth System to a crisis point in the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. If business as usual continues, the first full century of the Anthropocene will be marked by rapid deterioration of our physical, social, and economic environment. The decay of the biosphere will be most noticed as global warming and extreme weather, but we can also expect rising ocean levels leading to widespread flooding, the collapse of major fisheries, poisoned rivers, and more. Every planetary boundary is threatened, and a catastrophic convergence of multiple Earth System failures is possible. If that happens, the Anthropocene may be the shortest of all epochs, a transition period from the Holocene to something far worse.[[3]](#endnote-4)

This is the situation facing humanity. Climate change represents a deep crisis not only for the planet, but also society. It has become a political issue that can no longer be ignored.

This article takes a brief look at three aspects of the response to the climate crisis. First and most importantly, it looks at the politics of the new climate movement that has mobilised millions globally and demands “system change”. Second, it looks at the ruling class’s response, which should be understood as calculated more than denialist. And finally it looks at the revolutionary anti-capitalist response that is necessary. But before all that it is worth looking at the factors that brought this crisis into the mainstream.

## Setting the scene

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 report represented a turning point in popular consciousness regarding the climate crisis. It was just the latest in a series of similar scientific reports but it cut through because it graphically detailed the difference between warming of 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius and stated that we only have 12 years to reduce global emissions by half. Scientifically the report was not ground-breaking. Its predictions were conservative even at the time of release and have become more out of date in subsequent months. It widely accepted that 1.5 degrees warming is inevitable (4-6 degrees warming within this century is a serious prospect), and that feedback processes and catastrophic nonlinearities (tipping points) make it impossible to predict exactly how bad things may become. Nevertheless, one of the key features of the report was its accessible iteration of the scientific consensus that there must be “rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and industrial systems on a scale of which there is no documented historic precedent for”.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Another reason the IPCC report had such an impact is that the effects of climate change have become more noticeable. Australia’s 2019 bushfire season began in winter, after the warmest decade on record. By November fires raged across Queensland, a mega-fire had developed in northern NSW and 5 million people in Sydney were being poisoned on a daily basis by toxic smoke. By the end of December significant fires had erupted in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. By New Years Eve the fires had spread to the outer suburbs of Melbourne and in NSW families had been evacuated to the water as beachside towns were threatened or burned. Social media was awash with stories of friends escaping fires and pictures of towering infernos, charred koalas and the sky turned black at 9am. At the end of the first month of summer dozens had been killed, thousands of homes destroyed and over 500 billion animals perished.

It is not just Australia that has experienced such scenes. Globally, wildfires are more unpredictable and intense and the length of the fire weather season has increased by more than 19 percent since 1979.[[5]](#endnote-6)

But it is only now that the fires are widely understood not as a natural disaster but as a product of climate change, and by association, as a product of inept political leadership and neoliberalism. In Australia over the past decade, successive Labor and Liberal governments have cut tens of millions from state budgets for fire services. In NSW the 2019-20 budget saw almost $40 million stripped from fire services.[[6]](#endnote-7) The situation is similar across the rest of the world. Budget cuts were blamed for worsening the wildfires in California in 2019. And the fact that equipment and firefighters are now shared between the US and Australia (a mutually beneficial scheme to skimp on public services) is going to become a serious issue as the respective fire seasons are beginning to overlap. Neoliberal policies also fuelled fires in the Amazon in Brazil and Ecuador, in Lebanon, and in Greece in 2018. In Lebanon, shiny new anti-protest tanks fitted out with water cannons were used to attempt to extinguish the wildfires in October, a graphic depiction of the spending priorities of states.

If world leaders have shown themselves incapable of dealing with the effects of climate change, their efforts to resolve its causes are even more pathetic. The very best of the ruling class’s response amounts to little more than shifting the deckchairs on the Titanic. Nothing sums this up better than the trajectory and state of the Paris Agreement. It has progressed from tragedy to farce, and now to a state of suspended farcical tragedy. In 2015 when the agreement was proposed, it was already too late to be talking about gradual emissions reductions. The non-binding targets that countries set for themselves are based on net zero, rather than real zero – meaning that they are essentially figures drawn up through creative accounting and offsetting schemes. This is why the agreement was lauded by some of the world’s biggest fossil fuel giants, particularly those who wanted to use the cover of emissions targets to bolster natural gas. In the lead-up to the Paris conference, a joint letter by fossil fuel giants BP, Shell, Statoil and several others announced their commitment to reducing carbon emissions and urged the Paris conference to place a price on carbon emissions. On the day the Paris Agreement came into effect, they announced a $1 billion climate change fund – a fund which is almost entirely dedicated to the expansion of natural gas industries.[[7]](#endnote-8) BP was explicit about this: “We welcome the direction provided by the historic agreement reached at the UN climate conference in Paris…we will continue to play our part through means including energy efficiency, renewable energy and increasing the share of natural gas in our portfolio”*.*[[8]](#endnote-9)

Moreover, in the years since the Paris Agreement was signed – much like in the years following the signing of the Kyoto Protocol – emissions in all of the key signatory countries have risen. Trump’s withdrawal from the agreement, which will likely be followed by other far right leaders, rendered the whole thing a farce. As with nuclear disarmament, the biggest polluters are exempt from even the pretence of reducing emissions.

Into this scene enter Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg. Thunberg has played a crucial role in generating the new climate movement and encapsulates the widespread indignation towards the deckchair shifters. She has directly blamed the world’s rulers for the crisis. As a political figure Thunberg strikes the right moral chords, combining anger with hope. She has helped mobilise millions onto the streets. In late 2018 she spoke at the UN climate conference and called on students everywhere to join the student strikes. In November 2018 there were large student strikes in several cities around the world. In Australia, a few thousand turned out in Melbourne and Sydney, as well as hundreds in smaller cities and towns. In many countries, there were regular – sometimes even weekly – school strikes throughout 2019. But the highlights were the two all-out strikes called globally, in May and September, with the latter being the biggest global day of action for climate justice in decades. Across Europe, millions turned out, while in Australia 350,000 marched. One of the things that positively impacted the size was the fact that it pitched itself beyond high schoolers, as a general “global strike” for climate.

The size and reach of the climate strikes have created space for others to act. Extinction Rebellion (XR) is the other significant group that has emerged. Local environmental issues have also flared up and taken on new meaning as part of the new climate movement. In Australia the campaign to stop the Adani coal mine, for example, has become an important part of the new movement. And the October 2019 blockade against the International Mining Conference (IMARC) in Melbourne was made possible by the new wave of climate organising and the sense of urgency motivating it. Similarly, a mobilisation of 40,000 against government inaction on bushfires in Sydney in December 2019 cannot be understood outside of the context of the new climate movement.

Altogether there has been a marked shift in the politics of climate change over 2019. And now that the crisis is such an overt part of life it is difficult to imagine it vanishing as an issue. However, we should not view the politics of the climate crisis – whether expressed in popular opinion, by the ruling class or by climate activists – as completely original. New political situations do not automatically generate new ideologies. Instead, the climate crisis has become a prism through which traditional political ideologies are refracted and tested as new questions are thrown up. On the other hand, the objective realities of the climate crisis and the fact that people are searching for answers creates a more volatile political environment, and opens up new opportunities for the radical left.

## The new climate movement: rupture and continuity

Environmental activism has a long history. From the mid-1800s, ecology became an important part of science and social theory. Marx and Engels took a keen interest in environmental questions, considering the potential consequences of the metabolic rift as well as many early predictions of resource depletion, soil poisoning and even global warming.[[9]](#endnote-10) Throughout the twentieth century the environment became not just something to analyse but something to campaign about. By the 1970s environmental activism had become a mass issue, and one that was taken up by the left and the workers’ movement. In the US the 1970 “Earth Hour” mobilised 20 million people and helped to establish the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and bring about other progressive reforms.[[10]](#endnote-11) Around the same time in Australia, the Builders Labourers’ Federation pioneered “green bans”, a militant working class approach to winning environmental justice.[[11]](#endnote-12) In the 1980s much of this activism receded, along with other social movements, as neoliberal policies were pummelling an ever more defensive workers’ movement and consequently pulling society to the right and disorienting the left.

The 1990s saw new waves of environmental activism, particularly around the questions of greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Over this period innumerable environmental campaign groups and NGOs emerged. There were many mass mobilisations and a steady – though subterranean – increase in environmental consciousness. The character of this activity suffered from the fact that it came to prominence at a time when the workers’ movement and left were very weak. Though there were occasional flash points and significant campaigns, environmental activism heavily consisted of lobbying and electoralism. The transformation of Earth Hour, from something that emerged from the radicalisation of the 1960s to its reinvention in the 1990s as a corporate PR stunt, epitomises the broader shift.

Despite a proliferation of environmental NGOs, a ballooning of government environmental bureaucracies, the signing of the Kyoto Protocol and the initiation of several “green” market reforms, global emissions went up by 32 percent between 1990 and 2010. Frustrated by official inaction, many took up lifestylism throughout this period. This strategy reflected the atomised individualism of neoliberalism, while for a demoralised left, it fitted with their autonomist rejection of working class and mass politics. As well as being futile, lifestyle strategies to save the planet reinforce the dominant narrative that humans are collectively to blame for climate change.

The new climate movement is inevitably shaped by but also breaks away from this political heritage. It positively builds on the best elements of environmental awareness and activism over the last couple of decades. And it has broken through some of the existing political limitations and more conservative, NGO-moulded tactics, partly because the stakes seem so much higher now. The objective horrors of climate change and the fact that people are scared and angry can mean the politics and tactics of the movement will continue to shift and change, and can push beyond the current parameters. This is especially the case given that the movement is not organised around a central leadership or narrow set of demands. Instead there are a profusion of organisations, tactics, objectives and mobilisations, which will continue to develop as the struggle proceeds. But for now, there are a few key political features of the movement worth examining.

## Mass mobilisation and disruption

One of the most important features of the new climate movement is that it has drawn millions of people into street protests. These protests are not just an addendum to lobbying nor intended as purely symbolic events. Rather they are key to the strategy of the new movement, intended to stop business as usual. The focus has been on mass demonstrations in major cities, involving huge numbers of students and workers. Another positive has been the commitment to disruptive action. Although often more sentiment than reality – the demonstrations in Australia have not been hugely disruptive – it is a welcome development given the longstanding division in the environmental movement between those who favour mass tactics and those who organise small disruptive stunts. The fact that the mass mobilisations are called strikes, and take place on weekdays with the explicit goal of shutting down the city, is a massive advance on the type of actions that characterised the environment movement in the recent past, for example the relatively sedate Walk Against Warming rallies.

This development creates the political space for an argument about mass disruption beyond the climate strikes. Unfortunately XR, the main force seen to be filling this space, is increasingly reticent to be either radical or disruptive. This varies between XR branches and from country to country, but one clear example of the contradiction between the radicalism of XR on paper and in practice is the pro-police etiquette that accompanies their tactical use of mass arrests.[[12]](#endnote-13) It’s not just XR that suffers from this cognitive dissonance. In general, given the urgency of the situation and the emphasis placed on it being a crisis, the mobilisations organised by the new movement have been large and vibrant, but for the most part not particularly angry or militant. The tone is markedly different to that of other street protest movements that emerged during 2019. Common to all is young people fighting for their futures, which are collectively seen to be in serious jeopardy. But the cry of “death or liberty” from the Hong Kongers or the confrontations between Chilean students and the police are a long way from the mood of the climate protests. Nevertheless, the fact that people are on the streets “not drowning but fighting” creates natural bridges between the climate movement and the other rebellions and creates the potential for more radical politics and practice in the future.

## System change not climate change

One common thread between the climate movement and revolts elsewhere is the widespread conviction on the part of participants and those who sympathise with them that the system is to blame. For the climate movement, this is encapsulated in the slogan: “system change not climate change”. This cuts sharply against the previously established trope of mass complicity and the political conclusions derived from that, summed up by the slogan “be the change you want to see”. It is now popularly accepted that lifestyle choices will not be sufficient to address the climate catastrophe, and that those with real power must be held to account. Thunberg articulated this very clearly at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019:

[S]omeone is to blame… Some people, some companies, some decision makers in particular know exactly what priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money, and I think many of you here today belong to that group of people.[[13]](#endnote-14)

The desire for system change is expressed to an extent in some of the popular slogans of the movement: 100 per cent renewables, no new coal and zero emissions. But while the achievement of these demands requires system change in a technical sense, this doesn’t usually translate into corresponding political slogans: there are no calls for governments to be overthrown, for example. This reflects the dominant conception within the movement that those who currently run the world need to be convinced to run it differently. Overwhelmingly it is understood that this argument will be won by applying mass moral pressure on them. Thunberg’s repeated appearances at global forums of the ruling class are an indication of this perspective. Though she is angry and impassioned, the implicit aim is to convince the ruling class to see reason and embark on a comprehensive set of new policies. There is as yet no widespread imagining of an anti-capitalist form of system change, even as capitalism is more frequently blamed. Despite these limits, the popularity of the call for system change represents an important breakthrough, and creates a healthy space for political discussion in the movement.

## “We’re all in it together”

One of the more problematic aspects of the new climate movement is the emphasis on the idea that “we’re all in it together”. This is a statement reiterated frequently by Thunberg and XR and is often seen on placards at demonstrations. It reflects the longstanding idea that environmental questions are beyond class and politics. At one level it is true that environmental changes, especially severe ones, impact everybody. But the impacts are crucially mediated by class, to such a degree that it makes talking about any collective impact almost meaningless. These sorts of appeals to common humanity and universal interests have long been popular with a section of the ruling class. Note how centrist neoliberal leaders like Macron and Trudeau constantly proclaim the importance of international summits and agreements, using the anti-globalisation right as a foil for why progressive change cannot be achieved faster. This invariably builds a case for class collaboration, which if accepted, will be disastrous for the movement.[[14]](#endnote-15)

Worse, this slogan serves to blunt any critique of the ruling class. It suggests that even if they shoulder most of the blame, now that the damage is done we can all, brought together by the sheer urgency of the situation, find a solution. It is certainly true that the prognosis for climate change is dire and that the need for action is urgent. But there are different ways of understanding this catastrophic phenomenon. Right now in the climate movement it is most commonly seen in a classless, final way; the catastrophe that is envisaged is akin to a meteor hitting earth, where apocalypse is imposed on us in an instant by some external force. This is not the case. Catastrophic climate change is a product of capitalism. It is worsened every day because of the drive for profit accumulation and is made socially disastrous because of the inequality, oppression and exploitation that sustain the system. In the face of this reality, appealing to the ruling class is a dead end. The climate crisis is not the first issue to be seen as a uniquely urgent and existential threat; similarly disastrous arguments were made regarding the threat of nuclear proliferation and the rise of fascism.

To point to problems with treating climate catastrophe as an undifferentiated, universal threat is not to diminish the objective threat it poses. Some on the left have argued that it is tantamount to denialism.[[15]](#endnote-16) But a preoccupation with distinguishing ourselves from right wing climate denialism cannot be the starting point for our political approach and does not help to build a movement that can be effective. It is undoubtedly positive that the threat of environmental Armageddon has jolted people into action, and we certainly shouldnot downplay the significance of the threat. But the way in which the effects of climate change are going to create political conflict cannot be adequately addressed by a political approach that emphasises a unity of interests across the class divide.

## Climate justice

Existing uneasily alongside the previous slogan is the demand for climate justice. This increasingly popular concept acknowledges that the key crisis resulting from climate change is social and that the human suffering incurred from climate change is not distributed equally. Rather it is drastically uneven, both spatially and socially. It is the world’s poorest countries that face the most devastation from earthquakes, droughts and other events. Several Pacific islands are currently under threat of total submersion and whole townships have eroded and disappeared.[[16]](#endnote-17) There are currently 20 million climate refugees, not accounting for those internally displaced. The International Organization for Migration estimates that climate change will create 1.5 billion refugees over the next 30 years, mostly from poorer countries. The compounding impacts of imperialism, weak infrastructure and poverty leave these societies highly vulnerable to climate change. Climate refugees, like all refugees, face a brutal matrix of regimes perpetually competing with one another to strengthen their borders. The intersecting crises of global capitalism are being used to ratchet up racism in country after country and the climate crisis will inevitably be used in the same way. Already there are questions being raised within the movement about how to respond to this situation. The socialist left needs to make a strong case that as we fight to avoid the catastrophes that will create climate refugees, we must also fight to build a climate movement that is internationalist in outlook, and will defend their right to seek asylum.

Though the climate movement has been an overwhelmingly Western phenomenon, we can expect struggles in the global South to continue both against specific environmental vandalism and, increasingly, the social breakdown produced by extreme weather events. For several years in India there have been protests against environmental destruction.[[17]](#endnote-18) There is a similar dynamic in China, where there have been explosive struggles in response to chemical pollution and disasters.[[18]](#endnote-19) Many have argued that the dramatic social and economic effects of a sustained drought were an important – though not isolated – factor that helped trigger the revolution in Syria in 2011.[[19]](#endnote-20) This points to the fact that, regardless of whether there are strong existing movements about the general phenomenon of climate change, the effects of climate change itself will continue to spur resistance and activism. Where these effects are felt most acutely, it is likely to produce visceral and potentially radical responses.

Because of the very different social backdrop, the movement in the West is likely to remain mainly moral for a long time and not linked to acute class struggle or a battle for survival for most of its participants. Nevertheless, the Australian fires have organically raised class issues to do with health and safety, the funding of public services and workers’ rights.

Another aspect of the focus on climate justice, at least in Australia, has been a recognition of the class impacts of the crisis. Within the movement there is broad agreement building that workers working in environmentally destructive jobs which will have to be phased out should be ensured a just transition. This cuts against the notion, cynically spread by right wing politicians, that environmentalists secretly hate ordinary people, particularly blue collar workers in mining and other fossil fuel-related jobs. This shift is partly due to the mainstreaming of concern over climate change. Though specific polling has not been done about the attitudes of workers, by way of the fact that they make up the majority of the population it is clear that there is widespread opposition to climate change. And as well as there being overwhelming support for action on climate change in a general sense there is also a majority support – including in Queensland – for the specific demand to phase out coal in Australia. Almost three quarters (73 percent) of Queenslanders prefer that Australia’s coal-fired power stations are phased out either as soon as possible or gradually. Thirteen percent believe that coal does not need to be replaced by other power sources like wind or solar power (compared to the national average of 9 percent).[[20]](#endnote-21) As well as individual workers, several unions have backed the climate movement, including some that have been more conservative in the past. The NUW put out a strong statement supporting the September 20 climate strike. More impressively, Fenner Dunlop workers covered by the NUW, who were on strike at the time, explicitly linked their struggle to the climate movement. One of the lead delegates spoke at the September 20 climate strike demonstration in Melbourne. But apart from small, isolated examples like this, the union movement has done very little beyond giving verbal support to the general movement. The union contingents to the Melbourne strikes overwhelmingly consisted of paid officials. A mass union mobilisation would have fundamentally changed the nature of the event, would have given the climate movement a new confidence and power and would have been a step towards rebuilding the strength of the union movement. Instead the limelight was taken by the bosses of banks, universities and other polluting corporations, who were applauded for allowing - or even encouraging - their workers to participate.[[21]](#endnote-22)

## Ruling class response

For years climate denialism was a heaven-sent strategy for dealing with climate change. Those who claimed not to believe could openly court the fossil fuel companies, ride high on the profits they generated and castigate greenies for spoiling the fun. As Da Silva details elsewhere in this journal, this has been particularly important in Australia, which is heavily reliant on coal exports. For non-denialist politicians, climate denialism provided them with the perfect explanation for why nothing meaningful could be achieved; every attempt to put a price on carbon or pass strongly worded resolutions was thwarted by right wing, creationist Neanderthals. Those days are long gone. It’s no longer credible to claim ignorance of or disagreement with the climate science. The vast bulk of the ruling class now understands the basic facts of climate change, and they are now being judged over what they do about it.

Having said that, there is still a sizeable and important minority of the international ruling class who ostentatiously hold up the banner of climate denialism because it is core to their image as rampaging tyrants. For this set – Trump, Bolsanaro, Morrison – it is not so much about pretending to not believe the science as it is about arguing openly that deliberate and reckless plunder in the pursuit of obscene wealth is preferable to saving the planet. Possibly this will be a difficult posture to maintain. Morrison’s previous insistent denial of climate change and attacks on climate protests put him on the back foot during the fire crisis. Rather than assuming the role of leader pulling the nation through a tragedy, he became a hate figure.

But whatever divisions exist between the ruling class in terms of public positioning, on all of the underlying essentials there is a high level of agreement. They are out to save their skins and their system. At an individual level this looks like taking out “apocalypse insurance” in the form of luxury bunkers. It is estimated that half of Silicon Valley have invested in this latest fad. The bunkers, which are dug into the ground or are repurposed old silos or nuclear bunkers, are fitted out with every essential: spas, jacuzzis, home cinemas. And of course all come with their own private security. Cli-fi barely had time to become a recognisable genre before all of the best material was stolen by the real world.[[22]](#endnote-23)

Beyond looking after themselves, the ruling class has adopted several political strategies in response to climate change. The most important of these are authoritarianism, imperialism and greenwashing, none of them mutually exclusive. The common link is that all of these are strategies, not to stop or ameliorate the effects of climate change, but to defend and expand capitalism. The defence and expansion of capitalism is in fact antithetical to climate action. The stronger and more successful the capitalist class, the less capacity there is to halt the current trajectory of climate change. It is against the economic and political interests of the capitalist class as a whole to dismantle the fossil fuel industry at the rate and extent necessary (i.e. immediately and completely). Even if they were prepared to go against their interests, the system itself could not survive if the transitions necessary to solving the climate crisis were carried out. For capitalism, fossil fuels are not an addiction, they are oxygen. The most acute and distressing aspects of the climate crisis are social and in this way are directly caused by capitalism, rather than some natural ecological process. Authoritarianism, imperialism and the macabre beast that is “green capitalism” are every bit as much manifestations of the climate crisis as are rising sea levels and temperatures.

## Authoritarianism

States have seen climate change as a security threat for several decades. Since the cold war various governments have intermittently argued that they need to strengthen border controls, surveillance and general military operations in order to respond to the dangers it poses. In *Facing the Anthropocene* Angus sites a Pentagon report from 2003, commissioned and adopted during the presidency of famous climate denialist, George Bush. The report made recommendations about “an abrupt climate change scenario”:

The United States and Australia are likely to build defensive fortresses around their countries because they have the resources and reserves to achieve self-sufficiency. With diverse growing climates, wealth, technology, and abundant resources, the United States could likely survive shortened growing cycles and harsh weather conditions without catastrophic losses. Borders will be strengthened around the country to hold back unwanted starving immigrants from the Caribbean islands (an especially severe problem), Mexico, and South America.[[23]](#endnote-24)

As Angus points out, the only thing that this report failed to account for was that states would feel compelled to take these measures well before any abrupt catastrophic events.

Over the past decade borders everywhere have militarised to an extreme degree. Climate change is not the sole reason for this but it is certainly a factor and has increasingly been identified as a “threat multiplier”. All of the key military and security organisations have described climate change as a significant security threat for over a decade[[24]](#endnote-25). Australia’s Official Statement to the 2017 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction stated:

Asia is the most exposed region to low elevation climatic impacts like flooding and displacement…and has more than 90 per cent of the world’s exposure to tropical cyclones… The Indo-Pacific region has the world’s fastest growing economic hubs, its most populated cities, and the majority of the world’s poor. It also has the greatest vulnerability to climate-induced humanitarian and natural disasters such as severe storms, flooding and extreme heat, as well as the flow-on effects such as damage to economic and social infrastructure, disease outbreak, malnutrition and food and water shortages. This is a volatile mix of factors that heightens the security risk posed to Australia.[[25]](#endnote-26)

One of its recommendations is for the government to consider a “dedicated climate security leadership position in Home Affairs to coordinate climate resilience issues”. These euphemisms barely disguise the intention of states like Australia to allow millions of starving, desperate people to languish and die rather than let them into their country. Given these are the reports available to the public it is safe to assume that the internal reports and resolutions from the department of defence and other sections of the ruling class are several degrees more callous.

As well as authoritarianism in order to keep *out* refugees and safeguard natural resources, it is also being ramped up on the home front. Governments everywhere recognise that there has been a turning point in social attitudes about climate change, that the majority now understand that we are in a crisis and demand urgent, serious action. Further, they know that the effects of climate change will result in deeper levels of working class deprivation and animosity that can spark rebellions. These developments are added incentives for states to continue the push for more draconian internal regimes and specifically to criminalise climate protests. In Australia this has begun in quite a brazen way in response to the spate of climate activism in the second half of 2019. The federal government is proposing a series of anti-protest laws and two major state governments – both controlled by the Labor party – are clamping down on climate activism. The Victorian premier Daniel Andrews gushingly congratulated the police for the brutality that they meted out to climate activists protesting IMARC. In Queensland the state government have introduced wide ranging anti-protest laws that give police the power to stop and search suspected protesters. These harsh responses to what is, at this stage, a very liberal movement with considerable popular support is an indication of how desperately important it is for the Australian ruling class to defend the coal industry.

## Imperialism

The authoritarian fortification of borders cannot be understood without looking to the dynamics and impact of imperialism. It is the competition between states that leads them to fiercely control borders. But as well as encouraging the hoarding and protection of resources, climate change creates opportunities to plunder new markets and project strength. Resources like water represent future investment opportunities and key commodities like oil will become more valuable. We are already seeing governments planning to secure access to crucial resources. As one *Monthly Review* article explained:

The U.S. military, meanwhile, is preparing for a host of new vulnerabilities, related in particular to oil and water, and for interventions to secure U.S. global hegemony in these changing circumstances. Economic and military interests are working together to strategise means for securing global value and resource chains, so as both to strengthen Fortress America and secure its supply lines—working as well with its junior partners in the triad, Europe and Japan. This is the strategic repositioning of imperialism in the Anthropocene.[[26]](#endnote-27)

Though it is certainly the case that the climate crisis will spark new imperialist hostilities and conflicts over resources, it is important to recognise that resource wars have always been a feature of capitalism, from the vicious wars over bird poo in the nineteenth century through to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.[[27]](#endnote-28)

More intense imperialist conflict necessitates stronger states. One of the popular assumptions about the future of humanity on a hothouse earth is that states will diminish and even collapse as various climate crises unfold. While some minor states may collapse under the strain of climate change, the state system as a whole will not. In fact states will necessarily be strengthened, not only in order to protect the elite from internal dissent as previously discussed, but in order to defend “national” corporations against their foreign competitors.[[28]](#endnote-29)

A key lesson from all of this is that when we talk about ecological crises like climate change, biodiversity loss, water pollution and scarcity, and soil degradation, we are necessarily talking about systemic social problems with long and brutal histories under capitalist development. Hannah Holleman provides a Marxist account of this history in her book on the subject, *Dust Bowls of Empire*.[[29]](#endnote-30) When scientists describe the increase of Dust Bowl-like conditions under climate change, they signal a particular kind of violent ecological and social change. The projected crises have violent consequences. But equally violent are the social forces, historical developments, policies, and practices that produce such massive socioecological crises in the first place.

## Greenwashing

At the same time, we can expect more and more greenwashing and supposed “market solutions” from corporations and governments. There is lots of money to be made from going green and there is mounting consumer demand for it. Kanye West, always at the front of the pack, has just launched a new exclusive line of green shoes made of pond scum. On a larger and more malicious scale, “Green Resources” is a Norwegian company that sells forests to corporate clients to help them offset the carbon footprint of their businesses. In order to provide this service, Green Resources has forcibly demolished several villages in Uganda to make way for tree plantations. Green Resources was given the go ahead for this by prominent international certification bodies.[[30]](#endnote-31)

The largest global “green” enterprise is green energy. Much of what is branded as green energy is environmentally destructive and involves processes that are reliant on fossil fuels.[[31]](#endnote-32) Nuclear energy is also increasingly branded as green, despite being responsible for murdering millions, poisoning whole populations and the earth. In addition to the toll incurred by nuclear disaster, it is also a highly environmentally destructive industry, using enormous amounts of water to mine uranium and requiring vast quantities of concrete to construct and stabilise nuclear plants. The other related scam is the green branding of fossil fuel extraction, a PR trick that fossil fuel corporations and their defenders are becoming proficient at.[[32]](#endnote-33)

Side by side all of this, the more legitimate renewable sector is positively booming. It has grown larger every year but, despite this, has not resulted in any decline of the fossil fuel industry. In fact fossil fuel production has expanded and remains the most profitable and dominant energy source. As James Plested wrote in *Red Flag*:

Even if investment (of renewables) keeps growing rapidly in coming years, when you factor in the growth in overall demand for energy, renewables are still going to make up only a fraction of the supply for decades to come.

Total annual energy investment is US$1.8 trillion, more than US$700 billion being spent on the oil and gas supply alone. Investment in fossil fuels may be declining as a proportion of total investment in global energy capacity, but in absolute terms the industry is still growing, and is projected to continue growing for decades to come. Which is why, despite record investment in renewables, global emissions are continuing to rise.[[33]](#endnote-34)

Many of the countries with the most investment in renewables have some of the biggest levels of growth of fossil fuel usage and emissions. China for example has the highest investment of any country in renewable energy but it is also responsible for the biggest number of new coal projects and net increases to emissions.[[34]](#endnote-35) The Nordic countries are another example.[[35]](#endnote-36) Both of these are examples of growing economies. Wherever there is capitalist economic growth there will be emissions increases, a point I will return to.

Spurred on by popular opinion, governments are also joining the greenwashing bandwagon. But the bar has been set very low. The fact that many in the movement still put energy into urging governments to declare a climate emergency is an example of this. At the time of writing 1,261 legislatures around the world have declared a climate emergency, including 75 in Australia.[[36]](#endnote-37) Unsurprisingly, little action has followed, so this is now becoming recognised for the empty gesture that it is.

Resolutions and concrete targets appear to be more useful than such declarations but, in reality, they are just as superficial. A good case in point is the Zero Carbon Bill recently announced by New Zealand prime minister, Jacinda Ardern. The bill commits to reducing all greenhouse gases to zero by 2050 – except for methane, which will only be reduced by around 25 percent. Agriculture is New Zealand’s biggest industry and produces tonnes of methane, a gas that is far more destructive than CO2. Given this exemption, it is no surprise that the conservatives happily voted for the bill.[[37]](#endnote-38) Like pretty much every green policy adopted over the last decade, the bill leaves the profits and industries of the rich essentially untouched. This is achieved by fiddling the books, allowing companies to “offset” or “trade” their carbon footprint. These offsetting schemes are only going to become more elaborate and creative as green growth initiatives become more popular.

Green growth packages are an ever more popular greenwashing strategy being proposed by parties across the political spectrum. It is a strategy that puts governments on the front foot. Rather than making declarations and setting fake targets, green growth schemes aim to aggressively advance the interests of the capitalist class on the premise that economic growth can be paired with ecological sustainability. Whether green growth packages are put forward by the right or the left, they hinge on the idea that capitalism itself can solve the climate crisis. This is an important assumption to clarify.

## Is a green capitalism possible?

Capitalism is inherently and unavoidably destructive. As Marx identified, the metabolic rift between human society and nature is built into the very nature of the relations of production and distribution.[[38]](#endnote-39) The dynamic of capitalist production – to accumulate capital in competition with other capitals – requires the development and usage of techniques that are mass, cheap and quick. Sustainability is directly counterposed to the goal of capital accumulation. All capitalist industries are based on the endless depletion of finite resources, the utilisation of materials and methods with little concern for safety, all of which is done as cheaply, and therefore destructively, as possible. Even when it is in the long term interests of the capitalist system to protect the environment – in order to maintain stable and plentiful conditions for profit-making – it is extremely difficult for them to take any action which conflicts with the short term interests of individual companies or states. As Engels put it:

As individual capitalists are engaged in production and exchange for the sake of the immediate profit, only the nearest, most immediate results must first be taken into account. As long as the individual manufacturer or merchant sells a manufactured or purchased commodity with the usual coveted profit, he is satisfied and does not concern himself with what afterwards becomes of the commodity and its purchasers. The same thing applies to the natural effects of the same actions. What cared the Spanish planters in Cuba, who burned down forests on the slopes of the mountains and obtained from the ashes sufficient fertilisers for one generation of very highly profitable coffee trees – what cared they that the heavy tropical rainfall afterwards washed away the unprotected upper stratum of the soil, leaving behind only bare rock! In relation to nature, as to the immediate, the most tangible result; and then surprise is expressed that the more remote effects of actions directed to this end turn out to be quite different, are mostly quite the opposite in character.[[39]](#endnote-40)

Though the system is inherently destructive of the environment, the current crisis has been brought on by the rampant use of fossil fuels. Andreas Malm provides a detailed look at how fossil fuels became the dominant energy method and how they are now unbreakably melded with the DNA of capitalism. Coal-fired steam was not initially the preferred energy source, but as production became larger scale and more capital and labor intensive, it became indispensable. Flowing water was not a commodity with an exchange value. It was not able to be reproduced nor stockpiled by private firms, making it far less compatible with the new capitalist mode of production. Coal on the other hand was easily able to be bought, extracted and sold. Coal was also spatially and temporally flexible in a way that was impossible for water. It allowed factories to be established near large labour sources in major cities and to be kept running regardless of weather, time of day or season. Very quickly, this energy source became a fundamentally unique commodity and one that is, under capitalism, intractable. Malm summarises it well: “The fossil fuel economy is the energy basis of bourgeois property relations”. While other materials become physically embodied in specific commodities – leather in boots, raw cotton in textiles, and so on – coal, oil, and gas are “utilized across the spectrum of commodity production as the material that sets it in physical motion. Fossil fuels are the general lever for surplus-value production”. This also means that any growth under capitalism involves the growth of the fossil fuel industry. This has been true since the early 1800s, hence Malm’s suggested general law: “Where capital goes, emissions will immediately follow. The stronger global capital has become the more rampant the growth of CO2 emissions”.[[40]](#endnote-41)

Given this, it is impossible for another commodity to replace fossil fuels by stealth. Their replacement as an energy source will require a deliberate and comprehensive conversion of a vast array of processes. Just to name a few: international shipping, aviation, plastics, fertilisers; and concrete production would have to be radically restructured or rendered obsolete to effectively phase out fossil fuels use.[[41]](#endnote-42) Capitalists will never embark on such a mammoth shift willingly, the disruption would simply be too great. Additionally, the militaries of the major powers, which are responsible for substantial carbon emissions, could not be transitioned without a substantial weakening of their fighting capacity. In a society that constantly stokes imperial tensions, states will not be prepared to open themselves up in this way.

## Green growth and the Green New Deal

In his excellent article “Origins and Delusions of Green Growth”, Gareth Dale discusses the recent proliferation of green growth initiatives; comprehensive economic packages that aim to stimulate capitalist growth with new, green methods and industries. Dale describes how green growth has come to replace “sustainable development” projects and that this reflects a turn to a more rapacious and openly market-driven approach. The green element imbues these projects with a supposed social good while the growth element ensures that they are based firmly around the goal of capital accumulation. But rather than allowing market forces to operate freely, these projects revolve around state intervention, not primarily by way of nationalising industry but by offering incentives in order to stimulate the economy.[[42]](#endnote-43)

These projects became particularly popular after the GFC, a period in which the ruling class has been constantly scrambling for mechanisms to resuscitate economic growth. Because green growth initiatives are generally based on stimulating the productive side of the economy, they appear to represent an alternative to the strategy underlying quantitative easing and lowering interest rates. Instead of bosses being given handouts which they then refuse to invest, this form of stimulus flows directly into the real economy. In this way these projects can be described as green Keynesianism. There is nothing automatically supportable about Keynesian economic plans, and they do not have to be linked with any increases to welfare or the social position of workers. In fact many of the green growth packages proposed over the last ten years have had a distinct lack of socially progressive content. The South Korean green “five-year plan” that Dale discusses at length was put forward by an openly neoliberal government.

One of the most fashionable titles for green growth packages of late is the Green New Deal (GND) or just Green Deal. GND packages are being proposed from all over the political spectrum. As the *Financial Times* pointed out recently, “pretty much every sentence spoken by EU officials name checks the Green Deal”.[[43]](#endnote-44) The European Commission has launched a Green New Deal which is supported by parties from the left and the right.[[44]](#endnote-45) The UN supports a Green New Deal and calls were made for one at the 2019 COP25 conference. The GND was first associated with progressive forces. The first proposal came out of a UK think tank headed by Larry Elliot and then taken up by the Green Party. Today it has been made famous by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, who have both put forward policy packages under this name.

All versions of the GND claim that the dual purpose of the deal is to lower emissions and to provide a boost to the economy. It is pitched as a totalising reboot of society on a green basis. The versions of the GND put forward by Ocasio-Cortez and Ed Markey, Sanders, the British Labour Party under Corbyn, and several Green parties around the world contain a far more wide-reaching slate of policies, including many supportable welfare reforms. The versions offered by right wing and centrist forces are far more limited. The deal launched by the EU is essentially a glorified emissions trading scheme.

Nevertheless, despite the impression often given by their defenders, the packages which have captured the imagination of many on the left rest on the same basic premise as all green growth schemes. Like the original New Deal in the US, GND packages hope to revive the economy after a period of sluggishness, and to do so in a way that is both environmentally and socially transformative. But as was the case with the original New Deal, the left can support specific progressive policies that are bundled into it, without lending support to the scheme as a whole. Further, the claim that the scheme as a whole can use capitalist growth to advance social justice and radically reduce carbon emissions needs to be firmly rejected as both misguided and utopian.

Fighting for workers’ rights and just transitions should not be tied to incentivisation schemes for capitalists. It is dangerous to blur the lines between what is good for industry and what is good for workers. It opens the door to arguments like that made by Tony Burke, after Labor’s election loss in Australia in 2019, that demands for reducing emissions need to be downscaled because keeping coal profitable is essential to defending workers.[[45]](#endnote-46) This kind of argument is the flipside of the trend towards the new climate movement taking up workers’ rights under the banner of climate justice. It is about pitting workers against the movement, and even if it isn’t posed in such a way, the focus on GND policy obscures the way forward for workers’ rights in relation to the climate. There will need to be serious struggle, incorporated into the climate movement, to ensure justice as industry and wider social conditions change as a result of climate change. An electoral approach to policy reform is not going to cut it.

More problematic is the claim by proponents of the GND that it is a strategy capable of driving down emissions and arresting the climate crisis. The scale of profit-sacrifice and inter-capitalist cooperation that would be required to achieve this is unimaginable. In addition to cooperation within countries, serious advocates for the GND acknowledge that it would be impossible for policies, even far reaching ones, to have a meaningful impact on the environment unless they are linked in to similar changes made on an international scale. But there is no prospect for the kind of international cooperation that would be necessary to achieve this. With almost no shred of irony, the go to example used to prove that such international cooperation is possible is World War II! The fact that governments were prepared to nationalise industry (and that capitalists were prepared to let them) was so that they could build up the military strength against rivals in order to secure profits for the future. It is precisely this rivalry that makes any international turn away from fossil fuels impossible. Green capitalism may on first glance look like the only viable way out of the climate crisis, but as Dale argues:

The vision offered by green growth is beguiling: a lush, eco-balanced affluence engineered through ethical enterprise and smart markets. It is also a smokescreen. It is a red herring, a pink elephant, a delusion; it is a strategic mirage, a pied-piper panacea that seduces even critical spirits into complicity with capitalistic hegemonic projects that do little or nothing to repair humankind’s relationship with the environment.[[46]](#endnote-47)

In this context it is problematic for the GND to be popularised on the left at precisely the time when millions of people have begun to demand system change and are searching around for what that may look like. The proposals for a GND rest on a propagandistic argument that the totalising solution people are searching for can be achieved within the existing system. It is fanciful and counterproductive. Some on the left argue that the GND is a transitional demand. But it is more clarifying to see it as the anti-transitional answer. To the extent that there are transitional demands being raised by the movement – though it is dubious to classify them as such outside a revolutionary movement – they are things like 100 percent renewables, no new coal and zero emissions. These demands cannot be granted under capitalism, but the role of the GND is to argue that they can, that it is unnecessary and undesirable to transition away from capitalism because markets and governments can get it done. As a totalising political framework, the GND should be rejected by the revolutionary left in the same way that we reject the ideas that wage theft or imperialism can be overcome within capitalism. This does not mean that we should oppose individual policies or dismiss struggles for reforms that are conceived within the framework of the GND. Struggles for reforms are essential and are not the same as the ideological reformist response to the climate crisis.

## The revolutionary socialist response

The only way to stop temperatures rising further and to mitigate both the environmental and social effects of climate change is to completely overhaul production as we know it. Emissions need to be taken to zero as soon as possible. This will require a radical remodelling of every major industry and service. Many machines, plants and factories will be unusable, others will require huge technical transformation. This will make it necessary to dedicate enormous resources to technological and scientific research to find new methods of production. Similar resources will also need to be poured into damage control. We need mass sequestration of atmospheric carbon dioxide, that will include reforestation among other techniques. In addition to all of this there needs to be a huge injection into housing, infrastructure and healthcare all around the world, in order to ensure that people can be safeguarded against the impacts of climate change now and into the future.

Unlike some issues – for example global poverty or inequality – proposing such a sweeping vision of transformation is not unfamiliar or confrontational to people outside the radical left. There is an overwhelming consensus among scientists for action on this scale. The demands of the new climate movement are also a reflection of this consensus; for example 100 percent renewables, no new coal and zero emissions. To get even close to fulfilling any of these would require an unprecedented transformation of production and the majority of social institutions and norms. To call it unprecedented is a major understatement. In fact, under capitalism it is impossible. Economically and politically capitalism could neither permit nor survive such changes. Instead we need to fight for a social system that can accommodate these changes. A socialist society, where production is collectively controlled by the whole of society, would be able to replace the profit motive with the human need motive. A society without private ownership of production and capital renders accumulation for accumulation’s sake redundant. Decisions by the majority who collectively control and run production can only be made democratically. And there can be no doubt that the majority will decide to run things rationally, sustainably and justly. Such a society can only be built by overthrowing the current system through a mass upheaval of the poor and oppressed majority, led by the working class, not just in one country but as part of an international revolutionary process.

There are currently neither the organised forces nor the political consciousness required to carry out such a process. Yet the situation we face is urgent. But contrary to the catastrophist narrative that the end of days will be a single apocalyptic event, the climate crisis will unfold in various ways into the indefinite future. The situation is certainly urgent, but by a matter of degrees rather than absolutes. Tipping points will be reached at different times and will have different impacts depending on how society responds. The longer capitalism survives, the harsher the impacts of the crisis will be. Humanity is not simply hostage to “runaway climate change”. As has been the case for centuries, humans have the capacity to shape our environment – to impact weather patterns and soil conditions for example. This remains the case within the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is the result of environmental destruction set in play by the dynamics of capital accumulation. But the parameters of the Anthropocene are yet to be determined.

The sooner we get to socialism, the sooner we can make the conditions of the Anthropocene habitable. The task is urgent because the damage to the planet is accelerating and because the social toll will be increasingly horrific. But whatever world we inherit for socialism, we will be able to make it compatible with a democratic and egalitarian society. There is no point getting too specific about the ways that we will organise housing, food, transport and so on, except to say that managing a hothouse climate and developing long-term sustainable production practices will be a priority for a socialist society. This means that some specific conceptions of post-capitalist paradise might have to be discarded (like for example the idea that everyone can eat steak for three meals a day or fly around in a jet at whim) but it does not mean that we have to look forward to a spartan existence on starvation rations. The outlook for socialism has not been fundamentally altered by the climate crisis. Socialism will still be built on the basis of abundance and incredible technological advancement. We already have the capacity to qualitatively transform production to run sustainably. Our capacity for this would dramatically increase under socialism, when society is reorganised on the basis of human need, and when the capacity and creativity of science is fully unleashed.

The logic of socialism is the logic of ecological sustainability and, for that reason, it is not necessary to put forward a specifically “eco-socialist” vision. To insist that socialism must be made “eco” is to suggest that the foundations of socialism are not naturally ecologically sound, that we will need to make a series of adjustments to socialism in order to make it green. The result of this is to draw a false separation between the democratic content of socialism and the environmentally friendly content of eco-socialism. Socialism – a society based on the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs” – is automatically compatible with climate sustainability. If society was ruled democratically by the majority of ordinary people, why would they not want to organise production in a sustainable way? Similarly we should not draw a distinction between the aspects of socialism that are about making the planet more habitable and those that are about eradicating oppression and exploitation. It is only under conditions of human liberation that the planet can be saved. And the fight to save the planet is necessary for human liberation.

None of this is to say that time is irrelevant. Time is clearly working against us. But this just adds another item to the list of reasons to overthrow capitalism. Every day that this system survives is a disaster and a tragedy for millions of people. But unfortunately there are no shortcuts to overthrowing it. The socialist left needs to seriously build up our forces over the coming decades.

This means building socialist organisations, intervening into movements and weighing into the ideological debates of our time. There is a diffuse yet growing anti-capitalist sentiment within the new climate movement and within layers of young people around the world more broadly, growing up in the context of converging crises of capitalism. And there is a natural opening for socialist politics created by almost every slogan and demand of the movement. But there is not as yet a sizeable current who understand the fight against the climate crisis to be the fight for socialism. There is a gulf between what people know needs to be done and their strategic understanding of how to do it. This is understandable given the weakness of the revolutionary left and the left as a whole. But solutions that rest on the compliance of the capitalists or their system are not only futile but also harmful. For example the catastrophist prediction that everyone will open their eyes and act as one is a recipe for running headlong into the catastrophe with our eyes shut. The class battle at the heart of the climate crisis will become more acute and bitter, and the ruling class is already several moves ahead.

This will lead to several struggles. Short of socialism, there are many reforms that are worth fighting for in response to the climate crisis. Not because it’s possible for it to be reformed away, but because struggle strengthens our side and because we can fight to alter the social impact of climate change. Small victories can be won against fossil fuel companies, and these can give people inside and outside the movement confidence in the purpose of struggle. In Australia the campaign to stop the Adani coal mine has played a useful role within the movement; it is a tangible immediate objective that can be fought for alongside fighting for the overall eradication of fossil fuels. Though Adani has not been stopped, there have been a series of small wins as phases of the construction have been held up. It has also been a key concrete example of the united front that the ruling class has when it comes to defending coal.

The other key reforms to fight for are those that respond to the social impacts of climate change. Policies featured in GND packages, like the expansion of public housing, explicitly address class inequality. But while these are worthy policies, struggles are most likely to develop when demands emerge organically from the climate crisis. The fires across Australia raised a series of immediate demands: housing protection, government compensation for victims, healthcare and protection from smoke, including the right to not work in an unsafe environment such as that created by a pall of smoke hanging over the city. By far the most persistent demand is for the fire service to be adequately funded and for hundreds of thousands of additional firefighters to be paid. As the crisis unfolds and people take stock of the damage a demand to tax the fossil fuel companies in order to pay for the rebuilding has begun to be normalised. Such is the public pressure that Morrison has agreed to compensate volunteer firefighters for their efforts. Given that there were approximately 70,000 volunteer firefighters assisting in NSW alone, it’s easy to see how this promise could become a major problem for the government. Introducing decent payments to volunteers and exponentially expanding the number of full time paid firefighters directly cuts against the neoliberal organisation of the state. As the crisis plays out this will be an increasingly obvious obstacle to responding humanely and rationally to disasters. Consequently, “climate” politics and activism will very likely become more about social justice issues. That said, it is unlikely that the popular political understanding of the climate crisis that has been built up recently will dissipate. All the coverage and debate about the fires speaks to this. As well as demands for practical assistance, there is also huge anger at the government for its love of the coal industry and reckless approach to CO2 emissions.

Ultimately struggles for climate justice, and struggles against the capitalist class more broadly, are the only way to build the foundations required for the overthrow of capitalism. As Lenin argued: “only struggle discloses to [the exploited class] the magnitude of its own power, widens its horizon, enhances its abilities, clarifies its mind, forges its will”.[[47]](#endnote-48) It is an extremely positive development that a new movement has broken through over the last 12 months, and that it is demanding system change. In a practical sense the movement is also a huge breakthrough and one that should be welcomed by everyone on the left. Millions of predominantly young people are now engaged in a fight against the most powerful and uncompromising forces of capitalism.

The fossil fuel industry will not simply relinquish its powerful position in the face of our struggle and neither will the governments who defend them. This creates the basis for serious struggles that will be very difficult to shut down now that there is such broad consensus about the stakes of the situation. As well as the new climate movement with its generalised demands about climate change, we are going to see an increase in struggles against the effects of climate change, which are likely to interact with struggles against the consequences of neoliberalism that we are witnessing around the world. These two aspects of mass struggle can strengthen each other and become one mass challenge to the system. These will potentially be bitter and protracted fights, shaped at least in part by the response of the existing left.

The old socialist slogan “we have a world to win” has never been more apt. Anything less than that will be a disaster for the planet and the whole of humankind.

### References

Ababsa, Myriam 2015, “The End of the World: Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007-2010)” in Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (eds), *Syria: from Reform to Revolt*, 1, Syracuse University Press.

Angus, Ian 2016, *Facing the Anthropocene*, Monthly Review Press.

Angus, Ian 2017, *A Redder Shade of Green*, Monthly Review Press.

Bendix, Aria 2019, “45 unreal photos of billionaire ‘bunkers’ that could shelter the super rich during an apocalypse”, *Business Insider*, 11 June, <https://www.businessinsider.com/billionaire-bunkers-shelter-wealthy-during-apocalypse-2019-6>.

BP 2016, “The Paris Climate Agreement and the Future of Fossil Fuels”, 19 April, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/speeches/the-paris-climate-agreement-and-the-future-of-fossil-fuels.html>.

Burgmann, Meredith and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union: The Saving of a City*, New South Press, 2017.

Clark, Brett, John Bellamy Foster and Hannah Holleman 2019, “Imperialism in the Anthropocene”, *Monthly Review*, 1 July, <https://monthlyreview.org/2019/07/01/imperialism-in-the-anthropocene/>.

Climate Council 2015, “The Burning Issue: Climate Change and the Australian Bushfire Threat”, *Climate Council*, 2 December, <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/burningissuereport2015/>.

Dale, Gareth 2015, “Origins and Delusions of Green Growth” *International Socialist Review*, 97, Summer, <https://isreview.org/issue/97/origins-and-delusions-green-growth>.

Davis, Mike 2018, *Old Gods, New Enigmas. Marx’s Lost Theory*, Verso.

Engels, Frederick 1876, *The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm>.

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2018, “Implications of climate change for Australia’s national security”, 17 May, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Nationalsecurity/Final_Report>.

Holleman, Hannah 2018, *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics and the Injustices of “Green” Capitalism*, Yale University Press.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (86 authors) 2018, “Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5℃”, *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, October, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

Kandelaars, Michael 2016, “Marxism and the natural world”, *Marxist Left Review*, 11, Summer, <https://marxistleftreview.org/articles/marxism-and-the-natural-world/>.

Lenin 1917, “Lecture on the 1905 Revolution”, *Lenin’s Collected Works*, 23, Progress Publishers.

Malm, Andreas 2016, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso.

Markus, Andrew 2019, Mapping Social Cohesion Survey, Scanlon Institute, Monash University, <https://scanlonfoundation.org.au/archived-research/mapping-social-cohesion-survey-2019/>.

Mousseau, Frederic 2019, *Evicted for Carbon Credits: Norway, Sweden, and Finland Displace Ugandan Farmers for Carbon Trading*, The Oakland Institute.

Oil and Gas Climate Initiative 2016, “Taking Action. Accelerating a low emissions future”, <http://www.oilandgasclimateinitiative.com/news/2016-report-taking-action-accelerating-a-low-emissions-future>.

### Notes

1. Darryl Fears, “On land, Australia’s rising heat is ‘apocalyptic’. In the ocean, it’s worse”, *Washington Post*, 27 December 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Markus 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Angus 2016, p192. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Climate Council 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Simone White, “Morrison parties while Sydney chokes” *Red Flag*, 9 December 2019, <https://redflag.org.au/node/6971>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Oil and Gas Climate Initiative 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. BP 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Mike Davis provides an interesting account of the early history of discussions about global warming and their intersection with the socialist movement, with a particular focus on the work of Kropotkin in Davis 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Olivia B. Waxman, “Meet ‘Mr. Earth Day,’ the Man Who Helped Organize the Annual Observance”, *Time*, April 2019, <https://time.com/5570269/earth-day-origins/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. See Burgmann and Burgmann, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. On XR in relation to the police, see Sarah Garnham, “Resisting repression is inseparable from the struggle for climate justice” *Red Flag*, 4 November 2019, <https://redflag.org.au/node/6938> and for a more general critique of XR see JamesPlested, “Roger and Me – a socialist view on Extinction Rebellion”, *Red Flag*, 4 November 2019, <https://redflag.org.au/node/6939>. Also useful is Andrew Charles, “Extinction Rebellion: a short, critical guide”, *Overland*, 24 October 2019, <https://overland.org.au/2019/10/extinction-rebellion-a-short-critical-guide/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Heather Landy, “A 16-year-old tells Davos delegates that if the planet dies, she’s blaming them”, *Quartz*, January 26 2019, <https://qz.com/1533904/greta-thunberg-blames-davos-delegates-for-climate-change/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. One of the first proponents of the slogan “we are all in it together” was Gorbachev, who used it to describe his vision of building bridges and moving into a harmonious, booming period of capitalist development. He argued that the combination of globalisation and the threat of environmental catastrophe necessitated common cause between states and social movements to offer global solutions. The effect of this was to sow illusions in the UN as an instrument of progressive change, in opposition to Reagan who at the time was openly flouting its resolutions. The parallel with today is hard to miss. See Gorbachev’s speeches, “What made me a crusader” and “Nature will not wait”, <https://www.gorby.ru/userfiles/file/gorbaghev_book_speeches_en.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Ian Angus has argued this for years; Angus 2017, pp141-158. See also a debate about this topic between Angus, Eddie Yuen and Sam Gindin: Climate and Capitalism, <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2013/12/02/yuen-angus-debate-environmental-catastrophism/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Carly Cassella, “There’s a Climate Threat Facing Pacific Islands That’s More Dire Than Losing Land”, Science Alert, Global #Climate Strike, 19 September 2019, <https://www.sciencealert.com/pacific-islanders-are-in-a-climate-crisis-as-rising-sea-levels-threaten-water>. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. The construction of this dam in India was stalled for several years by protests: BBC, “Megadams: Battle on the Brahmaputra”, 20 March 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-26663820>; and in 2019 protests erupted when water supplies ran out in Chennai: Amrit Dhillon, “Chennai in crisis as authorities blamed for dire water shortage”, *The Guardian*, 19 June 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Samantha Hoffman and Jonathan Sullivan, “Environmental Protests Expose Weakness in China’s Leadership”, *Forbes*, 22 June 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesasia/2015/06/22/environmental-protests-expose-weakness-in-chinas-leadership/#22d8b5e53241>. On a mass movement against the construction of a petrochemical plant in Jinshan: see “Protest against proposed relocation of Gaoqiao paraxylene (PX) plant into Jinshan, Shanghai, China”, Environmental Justice Atlas, 10 June 2017, <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/protest-against-gaoqiao-paraxylene-px-plant-relocating-in-jinshan-shanghai-china>. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. See Ababsa 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. “Climate of the Nation” research report, 2019, <https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/Climate%20of%20the%20Nation%202019%20%5BWEB%5D.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Jerome Small, “Climate activism in the workplace”, *Red Flag*, 27 September 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Bendix 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Angus 2017, pp182-183. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Several reports and risk assessments are summarised here: Senate report to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, “Climate change-related threats to national security”, Parliament of Australia 14 June 2017, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Nationalsecurity/Final%20Report/c02>. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2018, chapter 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Clarke et al, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Kandelaars 2016, p7. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. For an excellent summary of this argument see Jonathan Neale, “Social collapse and climate breakdown”, *Ecologist*, 8 May 2019, <https://theecologist.org/2019/may/08/social-collapse-and-climate-breakdown>. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Holleman, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Mousseau 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. See for example Amit Katwala, “The spiralling environmental cost of our lithium battery addiction”, *Wired*, 5 August 2018, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/lithium-batteries-environment-impact>. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Richard Milne, “Johan Sverdrup: Norway’s big bet on a rosy future for oil”, *Financial Times*, 1 January 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. James Plested, “From rebellion to revolution: socialism and the environmental crisis”, *Red Flag*, 5 August 2019, <https://redflag.org.au/node/6869>. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Leslie Hook, “Climate change: how China moved from leader to laggard”, *Financial Times*, 25 November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Malm 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. “Climate emergency declarations in 1,261 jurisdictions and local governments cover 798 million citizens”, Climate Emergency Declaration, posted 18 December 2019,<https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/climate-emergency-declarations-cover-15-million-citizens/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Ben McKay, “‘This is our nuclear moment’: NZ passes climate change law”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Marx’s work on the metabolic rift is explained in a detailed and contemporary way in Kandelaars 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Engels 1876. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Malm 2016, pp52-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Concrete is a good example of the hidden omnipresence of fossil fuels; despite not being derived from fossil fuels concrete production accounts for 4-8 percent of emissions globally. See Jonathon Watts, “Concrete: the most destructive material on earth”, *The Guardian,* 25 February 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Dale 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Alan Beattie, “Palm oil case is a cautionary tale for Brussels’ Green Deal”, *Financial Times*, 19 December 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Mariana Mazzucato, “Europe’s Green Deal could be the most important in a generation”, *Financial Times*, 11 December 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Katharine Murphy, “Tony Burke floats Green New Deal-style approach to Labor’s Climate Policy, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Dale 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Lenin 1917, p241. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)