

Averting Catastrophe: Crisis, Class and Climate Change

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Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet. By Matthew Huber. London: Verso, 2022. 320 pp., £16.99 (paper). ISBN: 9781788733885.

Last year, the five biggest oil companies accumulated unprecedented profits of almost \$200bn, double or more compared to the previous year. Profits soared during the pandemic and then peaked following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when energy markets were disrupted with demands for new energy sources, triggering sharp increases in the price of oil and gas. Meanwhile, the most authoritative scientific body on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), declared in its most comprehensive of reports in early 2023 that systemic transformations are necessary to move away from fossil fuels. Mere weeks separated the announcement of the largest profits ever made in the history of Big Oil and the starkest ever warning by the IPCC of the dangers of climate change. With every season that passes, edging closer to potential climate and ecological breakdown, is there a more urgent contradiction? Between the profits of the capitalists and the knowledge of the scientists, how is this crisis to be addressed and by whom? Or, what is to be done and who is the historical agent with the capacity to wage this struggle? The capitalists have inexorable interests in intensifying the exploitation of people and planet and, defying all logic except that of accumulation, are investing in further extraction. The scientists have issued warnings and called for change, but make no claims about political strategy. The climate movement has managed to put the emergency onto the global agenda but has thus far been unable to force those in power to change course. In *Climate Change as Class War*, Matt Huber goes back to Marx and convincingly argues for the central and indispensable role of the working class in the struggle, offering a lucid starting point for a strategy that can reverse our current trajectory.

Huber makes three propositions about the need for a class analysis in our understanding of the crisis. First, the primary focus must be production, the point at which workers have power over capital, not consumption. Second, the climate movement needs to appeal to the working-class majority in society, not the professional and middle classes, as it does currently. Third, only mass popular movements constituted by the working class will be capable of transforming capitalist

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production. The theoretical emphasis on production is vital for defining the strategy and tactics of a mass movement that has any chance of defeating those in power, and the central strategy for the climate movement must be finding common cause with the labour movement, explicitly integrating the demands of working-class people into the climate movement. A radical Green New Deal is the concrete opening for that project, which would both improve the lives of working people in material terms and build a ‘working-class climate consciousness’ (p. 40) that also builds the working class itself. The tactic of building popular, inclusive, democratic mass movements must dominate – those that can take on the power of the state and corporations. Working-class agency is core to this analysis. On account of their objective structural power, workers have the capacity to take action in the immediate. We need not rely on waiting for governments to legislate against fossil fuel extraction or waiting for corporations to cease further exploration; so long as they are reaping profits from these pursuits, they are structurally incapable of doing so. Ultimately, the liberation of labour and nature, exploited in equal measure under capitalism, can only be realised by the conscious, purposeful dismantling of relations of ownership and control. Given that nature lacks agency (Malm, 2018), working-class agency is overwhelmingly our chief weapon for this task.

Foundational to Huber’s polemic is precisely this Marxist understanding of class. If class is not essentially about income, wealth or subjective questions of taste, but rather the relationship one has to the means of production, then consumption, lifestyle, greed and so on are secondary questions when it comes to addressing the climate. Succinctly put, class ‘is about how you generate the money that makes consumption possible’ (p. 20). The core problem, therefore, isn’t even the consumption patterns of the rich, but rather the way production is organised: a system of competitive accumulation driven by a global capitalist class that must prioritise profit above all else. Its nemesis is the international working class. Huber draws on classical Marxism to argue that the working class is powerful because it occupies a strategic location in the process of production such that it can stop production by collectively withdrawing its labour. Because it suffers wage exploitation and insecurity, the working class has a material, objective interest in overturning current relations of production. And because it constitutes the vast majority in society, any fundamental change has to involve the working class.

There are a number of complexities related to the degree of control one has in the class structure of a given society, who exactly constitutes the working class and how it has changed (Moody, 2017), and how gender, sexuality, race, citizenship, disability and other identities intersect with and structure class power. By virtue of being separated from the land as a direct source of livelihood and forced to survive under the vagaries of the market, the working class is made up of those people who lack access to ‘the ecological means of life itself’ (p. 46). The climate and ecological crisis is only intensifying this alienation from nature by forcing people to migrate and by becoming a driver of proletarianisation around the world. The sheer scale of the working class on a global level, whose incessant growth includes the informal proletariat, petty producers, traders and so on, also makes for being the most diverse class in terms of gender, race and so on. Objectively, it remains that only the working class, in the broadest sense, has the capacity to bring about relations that are not exploitative and alienated and, through this struggle, bring an end to emissions and chart a path out of potential catastrophe.

Taking Production Seriously

The focus on the material structure of production places responsibility for the crisis on the minority of capitalists who control production processes that yield infinitely more emissions compared to the rest of the population, but who are inevitably indifferent to the environmental impact of these processes. This includes extractive and industrial capital and increasingly ‘green’ capital.

Huber spends considerable time explaining, for example, how the nitrogen cycle – a natural process essential to human and planetary health – has been transformed into fossil capital through the development of cheap nitrogen fertiliser as an agricultural input to replenish soil fertility. Based on the massively increased use and colossal waste of fertiliser, this has led to huge profits for the commercial fertiliser industry and more greenhouse gas emissions. In turn, it has led to ‘cheap food and cheap workers’ (p. 99) that has exhausted the quality of food and of working-class life.

Conversely, if the focus is on consumption, then responsibility shifts away from the source of emissions and onto either individual consumers or the working class as a whole. The moralism involved in blaming the subjective lifestyle choices of those who have few choices to begin with – those choices only reflecting the necessities of social reproduction – diverts attention away from the capitalist class and ends up supporting the idea that the problem is one of market exchange, and that the solution lies within market mechanisms. In Huber’s words, ‘given the democratic majority position of the working class, it is fundamentally anti-democratic to think we can solve climate change by scolding the consumption of the majority’ (p. 39). The focus on individual consumption promotes the idea that consumers have sovereignty and that corporations respond to consumer demand. This misconstrues reality: it is production that determines consumption and it is corporations that work to constrain consumer choices, particularly in the realm of social reproduction. Consumer sovereignty is a myth – and a delusion – espoused by those with relative spending power, not a theory with which to confront capitalist relations. And while ultimately reducing consumption is important, it only makes sense in the context of abundance for all. This is where Huber’s critique of degrowth is pertinent.

Proponents of degrowth call for ‘material downscaling’ (Akbulut, 2021) in the form of aggregate negative growth, concentrating on the overconsumption of the Global North, and a break with the fetish of economic growth to allow for alternative, local and sustainable levels of consumption to be developed – in short, an ideology centred around a politics of less (Hickel, 2020). They draw attention to the very real problems with endless growth in capitalist society, the tragedy of waste and pollution and the need to do things differently. The idea of sustainability is compelling, and there have been a number of movements around the world that have taken up powerful ideas around living in harmony with nature, which would necessarily involve co-operation over competition, need over profit, use value over exchange value. Focused as it is on consumption and reducing consumption, however, degrowth understandably fails to resonate with a working-class majority whose lived experience has always been austerity.

Moreover, if the problem is overconsumption in the aggregate, there is no real reckoning with inequality within societies and no compass for what should grow and degrow. As Huber points out, ‘class struggle does not work on the aggregate – it has to mean more for the many and less for the few’ (p. 32). Is it any wonder that the brutal reality of working-class life, including in the Global North, of unemployment, food banks, rising energy bills, severe choices between heating and eating, and austerity in general, would hardly find resonance with a politics of less? And if the main division becomes that between the Global North and the Global South and not between classes, degrowth ends up berating working-class people in the Global North for consuming at all, serving to reinforce divisions within the working classes. Taken to its logical conclusion, we are left with the distortion that the working class in the Global North exploits those in the Global South (Saito, 2022). In the end, because it remains at the level of ideology, degrowth fails to equip us with a strategy that can bring about the ideals it raises. This strategy must entail a confrontation with those who are obstacles to the realisation of those ideals, and therefore must take seriously the sphere of production, where workers have power and without whom the struggle for transforming the mode of production is meaningless.

Defeating Those in Power

The concerns that Huber argues dominate the climate movement today – guilt around consumption and the focus on reducing consumption, knowledge and information about the science and spreading that knowledge, persuading the public and authorities about the impact of the crisis – largely reflect the class position of those at the forefront of the movement, what he calls the professional class. The enemy for degrowthers, for example, is not the capitalist class, but the ideology of growth. The problem for many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists and academics is the lack of knowledge, while for many policymakers it comes down to the lack of market incentives. For scientists, the challenge is the lack of widespread awareness of the science. Even for a section of the so-called anti-system radicals, the enemy is property (Malm, 2021) – fossil fuel infrastructure, for example – rather than the class that owns the infrastructure. Confrontation with the capitalist class through the collective withdrawal of labour has not been the main concern of those busy blowing up pipelines, deflating tyres or shutting down coal mines, imperative though some of these activities are. Mapping this terrain in what is ‘a sober class analysis of the climate justice movement’ (p. 35) is useful for understanding strategic weaknesses, tactical choices and the theories that underpin them, and consequently what needs rethinking. If we accept that the priorities of capital accumulation is the main problem, then the goal must be a strategy that destabilises the capitalist class, confronts the state structures that sustain it and builds the power of working people to take control – first of production, then of society altogether.

In the context of multiple, intersecting crises, there has been an explosion of insurgent protest movements around the world, accompanied by a rising militancy among workers in both the Global South and North. Massive upheavals are now part of the political landscape, from Chile, India and Algeria to France, Greece, Britain and beyond. These have tended to erupt over the most immediate economic and social issues: wages and conditions at work, the cost-of-living crisis and the inadequacy of welfare. Millions of people have also protested recently over war, racism and sexism. The climate movement too has mobilised millions, particularly prior to the pandemic. But it has yet to appeal to the everyday concerns of the ‘proletarianized billions who survive not from the land, but from the market’ (p. 36) – not only wage workers, Huber emphasises, but everyone who suffers insecurity and a lack of control over the processes destroying the earth’s metabolism because they are ‘separated from the conditions of life’ (p. 188). This proletarian ecology, according to Huber, is what makes climate change seem abstract and lead to feelings of powerlessness over addressing the crisis. The climate movement cannot substitute for this lack of control; power must be won by workers themselves.

The strategic task that this analysis raises is to find ways to link the question of the climate emergency with the wider social revolts. To do this, there needs to be an understanding that whatever destabilises the status quo is in itself an advance for climate activists who aspire to fundamental social transformation. This is true in a very concrete sense. The current round of strikes in Britain, for example, while centred on the question of wages compared to inflation, is itself raising some of the issues necessary to address the climate crisis: calls for renationalisation of the railways, utilities and post, for more public ownership, planning and public spending in general, and for an equitable distribution of wealth and resources. It was an interesting coincidence that as the climate movement in Britain was mobilising tens of thousands of climate activists around Earth Day this year, over 1300 North Sea oil and gas workers staged a 48-hour stoppage – dubbed by the union as the biggest in a generation – over the same weekend. They were striking over pay and conditions but they dealt a blow exactly where it is needed in climate terms: they shut down eight major oil and gas operators, including BP, Shell and Total, halting production on dozens of platforms. The union warned that the strike would lead to a tsunami of industrial unrest in the offshore

sector if record profits did not benefit workers. While we need the courageous activists on the outside of industry attempting to shut it down, it is far more effective to have workers on the inside of industry shutting it down themselves first. The fact is, if we are talking about disruption, working people have an unparalleled power to disrupt.

We might start with strategic sectors – Huber focuses on the electricity sector in the United States because of the fact that it is one of the most heavily unionised sectors, because it has the power to literally shut things down and because it is already a sector that has public oversight – but in other contexts, it might be more strategic to work with other sectors or unions that are already resisting. Victories on these fronts open the possibility of raising specific climate demands. They also generate a sense of confidence on the part of strikers, a profound and conscious questioning of the priorities of a system that is slashing wages and allowing services to fall into disrepair, while the same people in power spend billions on weapons for permanent war, in which neither the vast majority nor the planet has interests. The role of the Green New Deal is clear in appealing to people's material interests, but Huber only touches on the crucial role of political organisation beyond the mainstream as a mechanism for helping build a climate consciousness on a mass scale.

Conclusion

Nearly five decades into the neoliberal assault on the working classes, amid the horrifying prospect of climate and ecological breakdown, the challenges before us cannot be underestimated. We would, however, also be underestimating the potential for a way out of the crisis if we failed to recognise and build on the possibilities of the present, the first signs of a deepening structural crisis in the here and now – the exhaustion of neoliberalism, and economic and social stresses all over the world that can create opportunities to defy ruling class power, in the unions and in the streets. We necessarily have to contend with the challenges: organised workers in the trade unions are often constrained by union bureaucracies that seek compromise; consciousness is uneven within the working class; and pessimism and defeat can overwhelm the best organisers. Despite these, there have been fundamental breakthroughs in the past, not just following the Russian Revolution but the post-Second World War period, 1968, 2011 and even 2019, where society was reimagined and the task of reordering it begun. By resurrecting accounts of revolutionary upheaval and moments of rupture that have been written out of history, and relating to existing struggles that working-class people are already fighting, we learn from those struggles and can advance them.

Climate Change as Class War is an immense contribution towards putting the case for a stronger working class as a climate objective. Concluding the book, Huber argues that it did not take long for the balance of power to shift towards the working class in mid-1930s America when a combination of crisis and militant upsurge created the conditions for a momentous restructuring of capitalist relations in the form of the New Deal. It is absolutely true that the conditions for considerable political change can come quickly, and we need to be prepared. The work of political organising can be seen as putting things off, but we need to think in terms of the scale of the crisis. If we have to build mass movements that are powerful, democratic, internationalist and capable of reorganising society, then there are no shortcuts. The series of crises we face now are even deeper than those that wracked the 1930s, and the potential for movements to demand fundamental change is real. It is to this eventuality that we must bend our will.

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