

Fiddling while Rome burns, a report from Rio

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The United Nations conference on Sustainable Development that took place in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 was nothing short of a disaster. Called to mark twenty years since the first Earth Summit, Rio+20 was supposed to demonstrate that governments were taking environmental crisis seriously. Despite the high-profile conference the conference's concluding statement, optimistically called *The Future that We Want* contained little of substance.

In a post conference statement, Oxfam described the event as a "hoax" and declared that participants were:

Paralysed by inertia and in hock to vested interests, too many are unable to join up the dots and solve the connected crises of environment, equity and economy. The poorest people on earth are paying the highest price.¹

The tragedy of Rio is that rather than it being a surprise it forms part of a pattern. Over the last few years, environmental conferences particularly those dedicated to dealing with climate change have increasingly failed to offer concrete solutions.

Given the grave state of the environment, exactly the opposite should be happening. As I write this we are seeing one of the wettest summers ever in the British Isles, bringing heavy rain and flooding. Elsewhere in the world, unseasonal weather is having even more dramatic and dangerous effects. The United

States is experiencing its worst and most widespread drought since the mid-1950s with around 80% of the country "abnormally dry". Over one thousand US counties have been declared disaster areas. Around a third of the country's corn crop is considered in poor or very poor condition.²

The United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration report that "June 2012 also marks the 36th consecutive June and 328th consecutive month with a global temperature above the 20th century average."³

This will have devastating consequences for millions of people. Wildfires, flooding, storms and drought are already claiming victims around the globe as higher temperatures increase the likelihood of extreme weather. Unseasonal weather earlier in the year helped to destroy crops and increase the costs of farming in countries like India and Mexico. In some parts of the world this is already causing higher prices. In March the price of US corn hit its highest level since the global crisis of 2008. In other places we may see a repeat of the food riots that took place as hungry people took to the streets in dozens of cities.

In this article I want to examine why Rio+20 failed, and the reasons behind capitalism's inability to act on environmental issues.

Firstly, let us look back at the first Earth Summit in 1992. In that year, world leaders met in Rio de Janeiro in an atmosphere of hope and excitement. For grow-

¹Oxfam Press Release, 22nd June 2012

²BBC News, "Worst US drought since 1956 hits residents and crops", 16 July 2012 available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-18864753

³*State of the Climate: Global Analysis*, June 2012, NOAA, National Climate Data Center, available at <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov>

ing numbers of people, environmental issues were of increasing importance. A few years before nuclear disaster at Chernobyl had terrified millions. There was growing public awareness of issues like global warming and the destruction of the ozone layer, leading to a growth in membership of environmental organisations and Green Parties.

In 2012 few major world leaders went to Rio. Obama and David Cameron didn't attend, nor did most of the G20 leaders. But back in 1992 it was different. World leaders rushed to be seen to care about the planet, from Britain, John Major and three of his ministers went. President George Bush senior was there and some of his speech is worth quoting:

America's record on environmental protection is second to none. So I did not come here to apologise. We come to press on with deliberate purpose and forceful action. Such action will demonstrate our continuing commitment to leadership and to international co-operation on the environment.⁴

Despite many fine words like these Rio 1992 made no difference to the world's worsening environmental situation. The reasons for this were rooted in the economic system, but also the growing commitment from the governments of the developed world to neo-liberalism.

Bush's speech continued;

There are those who say it takes state control to protect the environment. Well, let them go to eastern Europe,

where the poisoned bodies of children now pay for the sins of fallen dictators, and only the new breeze of freedom is allowing for clean-up. Today we realise that growth is the engine of change and a friend of the environment.

Writing in August 1992, Dave Treece pointed out that, "The Earth Summit demonstrated that those who hypocritically claim to speak of 'our common future', while upholding an exploitative, destructive market system, cannot be relied upon to abolish the conditions which endanger our well being and survival."⁵

Treece's early assessment was proved absolutely correct. Since Rio '92, governments around the globe have furthered their commitment to the neo-liberal agenda and consequently, have undermined or blocked environmental action.

The raw figures demonstrate the extent of the failure. Since 1992, thousands of species of plants and animals have gone extinct. Global warming has got dramatically worse with emissions from energy use alone up 48% in twenty years. This has led to ecological changes on an enormous scale - summer Arctic ice has decreased by three million square kilometres in the same period. In the 1990s, the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest was the symbol of environmental destruction, yet this has hardly abated. Thirty-one million hectares of Brazilian forest has disappeared in the last two decades.

Within ten years of Rio 1992 the cracks were beginning to appear. The first follow-up conference in Johannesburg in 2002 was an all together different event. Then, Bush

⁴Quoted in Vidal, John, "Rio+20: Earth Summit dawns with stormier clouds than in 1992", The Guardian, Tuesday 19 June 2012

⁵Treece, Dave "Why the Earth Summit failed", *International Socialism Journal*, Autumn 1992, available at www.isj.org.uk/?id=816

junior attacked delegates and environmental campaigners without even attending leaving his Secretary of State Colin Powell to face protests from delegates. Bush's government had vetoed the 1997 Kyoto agreement on reducing carbon emissions and he was rightly seen as a pawn of the fossil fuel industries.

Climate conferences became increasingly ineffectual. Governments are more and more committed to finding environmental solutions based on free-market mechanisms and stimulating "growth" rather than any form of state intervention. Nonetheless, meetings tended to finish with commitments for action. This changed at Copenhagen in 2009.

The Copenhagen conference was one of the annual meetings of the UN to discuss climate change. Historically they have always been a battle ground for governments, struggling to protect their vested interests. The 2009 event though was widely billed as the last chance for serious action on global warming. Around the globe impressive demonstrations and mobilisations urged action from ministers. In London upwards of 50,000 people marched as part of "The Wave". In Copenhagen large militant protests demanded "system change, not climate change". But the conference ended in farce. President Obama made a "rude" speech that promised nothing then met with the leaders of China, Brazil, India and South Africa, countries that stood to lose the most from any agreement to reduce emissions. These leaders agreed a White house written "accord" which offered no action. This effectively destroyed the Copenhagen conference.

Other countries, such as the European powers failed to challenge this, as Jonathan Neale comments, they "were under pressure from their companies to pull back. Earlier in the year Merkel tried to push

for tighter gas mileage rules for European cars. Volkswagen and Daimler, the largest corporations in Germany, forced her not to. Brown in Britain was leading a chorus calling for severe cuts in public expenditure."⁶ Obama himself had chosen to side with the bankers and businessmen.

The Copenhagen debacle set the scene for Rio. In June 2012, the Brazilian hosts of the UN summit were desperate to avoid repeating this failure. In order to reach an agreement in frantic late night sessions, delegates agreed a document that contained nothing remotely controversial.

Signatories did however re-commit themselves to "growth" and solutions such as "mobilizing funding from a variety of sources, public and private... including innovative sources of finance".

Central to the Rio process was the conception of the "Green Economy". This is fine sounding, but can mean many things to different people. For the majority of delegates in Brazil it was a statement that links the question of environmental crisis to market solutions. At its most simplest the Green Economy is merely the greening of the existing economy. But it also means the extension of free market mechanisms to correct the "misallocation of capital" which has caused unsustainable development in the past.

The idea that the markets have not been given enough freedom to deal with environmental question is not new. It was for instance at the heart of Sir Nicolas Stern's 2006 review for the British government on climate change. Up until now market solutions have tended to concentrate on assigning prices to pollutants such as carbon, and thus creating a market for "carbon credits" which are supposed to encourage companies to reduce emissions. So far these at-

⁶Neale, Jonathan, "Climate Politics after Copenhagen", *International Socialism*, Spring 2010, p47

tempts have been little short of a failure.⁷

Now some governments are keen to extend this dramatically. Representatives of the British government in particular went to Rio arguing for “Natural Capital”. Deputy PM Nick Clegg explained that “in the UK we have committed to including natural capital within our system of national accounts by 2020 We have established a Natural Capital Committee, to provide us with advice on the state of our natural capital.”⁸ In practice, this means creating a pricing database of natural resources, lakes, forests and other natural features. While proponents argue this means that the environment will be taken into account when governments make plans, what it really means is the commoditisation of the natural world. Recently the British Environmental Secretary, Caroline Spelman claimed that “a tree in an urban areas confers £38,000-worth of economic and social benefits”. Britain is not alone in this, a report funded by the Irish Department of the Environment, states that the “economic value of biodiversity to Ireland has been calculated at €2.5 billion per annum.” Later it claims that “earthworms could be said to contribute up to €723 million per annum” to Irish agriculture.⁹

Once the world has been neatly priced like this the consequences are obvious. Developers wanting to build on a forested area have only to stump up money for each tree in order to chop them down. Whether replacement saplings are ever planted or have the same environmental contribution will be left to the whims of the market.

The enormous presence of multination-

als at Rio will come as no surprise. Representatives of corporations such as Pepsi, Union Carbide, Shell, NP and Nestle enjoyed unprecedented access to delegates. Over one thousands companies had people at the summit and the logos of “partners” adorned posters welcoming delegates to the city from the moment their planes landed to the conference doors.

Outside the conference there was enormous cynicism towards the UN event. Activists gathering for the alternate Peoples’ Summit had little, if any belief that the outcome of Rio+20 would be anything other than a green-wash. In the beautiful setting of Flamenco Park some 15,000 activists took part in hundreds of meetings to discuss the alternative. Those of us who had taken part in events such as Social Forums, Genoa 2001 or the Cochabamba conference were reminded of some of the heights of the anti-capitalist movement. Not least in the critique of capitalism common amongst many activists.

Yet here too there were some problems. On the opening day of the Rio+20 summit up to 50,000 people took part in an enormous demonstration against the commoditisation of nature and in defence of the commons.

This was a demonstration dominated by the trade union movement and mass organisations of rural workers, landless peasants and indigenous peoples. For socialists who believe that mass action from the producers of the world is what is needed to stop capitalism this was a high light of the week. On the march were workers fighting austerity, unemployment and demanding better conditions - from striking uni-

⁷An excellent criqitue of Carbon Trading can be found in *Upsetting the Offset: The Political Economy of Carbon Markets*, Steffen Bhm and Siddhartha Dabhi (eds), MayFly Books, London 2009 (also available for free download at www.tni.org)

⁸www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/rio-20-earth-summit-diary-20-june

⁹*Ireland’s Natural Capital: Considering Biodiversity in the Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy*, Irish Environmental Network, April 2012

versity workers and fire-fighters demanding pay parity with the police to indigenous people protesting dam building and deforestation.

Unfortunately few of these important organisations had more than a token presence at the Peoples' Summit. The CUT trade union for instance had a tent which hosted a number of meetings, yet there were few delegations of workers taking place in debates and no major presence from other unions. The Brazilian landless workers movement (MST) is a mass organisation; on the demonstration its delegation was several thousands in number, marching in a disciplined block. Yet at the Peoples' Summit their intervention was limited to a dozen or so activists promoting one of their agricultural schools and distributing cocoa beans.

While the Peoples' Summit brought together many campaigners their issues were often separated. In particular the Summit did not bring together those actively fighting the system, with those campaigning for environmental justice in large enough numbers.

Brazilian politics demonstrates this in microcosm. During the UN conference indigenous people had occupied the site of the Belo Monte Dam. This is a dam threatens the homes of some thirty thousand indigenous people in the Amazon rainforest. Earlier in the year, construction workers at the same dam had gone on strike demanding "free air fare, permissions to visit hometowns every three months instead of the current six-month period and a higher-value monthly meal voucher".¹⁰ The Brazilian government has just given the go ahead for a new Forestry Code that will open up more of the coun-

try's rainforest to logging by multinationals. It will even give an amnesty to those who have illegally cut the wood for decades.

Here are issues that link indigenous people, landless workers and trade unionists. The Peoples' Summit should have been an opportunity to bring together these movements, and come up with concrete alternatives.

One of the jobs of the left has to be to try and unite struggles. In the context of growing world-wide economic crisis and the increasing threat of environmental disaster a socialist argument that says governments need to create "climate jobs" to solve both unemployment and environmental problems can get a wide hearing. Certainly in Brazil, in a small way we were able to raise these issues as part of a critique of mainstream environmental solutions.

Such a strategy is a way of opening up the debate about what sort of economy we need, and how it can be organised. A transitional demand like "climate jobs" can be a bridge towards revolutionary politics. Sadly there were too few socialists in Rio making these connections.

The danger is that the cynicism and demoralisation that followed the Copenhagen conference deepens in the aftermath of Rio+20. A few days after the conference ended, veteran environmentalist George Monbiot argued that the international process is now almost pointless. For him, we should "give up" on such global agreements, and fight to preserve what we can, where we can; "Rewilding - the mass restoration of ecosystems - offers the best hope we have of creating refuges for the natural world".¹¹

¹⁰Press TV report, Tuesday 24 April, 2012. Available at www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/04/24/237813/brazils-amazon-dam-workers-go-on-strike/

¹¹Monbiot, George, "After Rio, we know Governments have given up on the planet", The Guardian, Monday 25 June 2012

It is not automatic that every environmentalist will be demoralised to this extent, but without a conscious attempt to shape the movement many will. Raising demands that link struggles against austerity with environmental justice is one way of giving confidence to an environmental movement that has all too often, been separated off from the activities of socialists and trade unionists.

Socialists though must go one step further. The utter failure of world leaders to get action on climate change is rooted in an economic system that can only see the natural world as a source of materials for the production process, or a sink for its wastes. A socialist critique of capitalism must also acknowledge its environmental destruction.

We are not unique in this understanding. It was clear from the discussions and debates at the Peoples' Summit that hundreds of thousands of people understand that a system geared towards profits can only lead to further environmental disas-

ter. On the demonstration the MST for instance, carried a banner declaring "we reject the false solutions of green capitalism".¹²

What socialists can offer, apart from strategies to win individual campaigns, is a vision of an alternative society, based on democratic planning from below. A socialist society where, in Marx's words, "*the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature*".¹³

For Marx, this was a precondition for a sustainable world. As he pointed out "a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, [beneficiaries] and, like *boni patres familias* ,[good heads of households] they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition."¹⁴

¹²See a picture of the banner and a report of the protest at www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=28878

¹³Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume II*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p820

¹⁴As above, p776