

CAPITALISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE, 25.5.15

Ric Lander (co-editor, Bright-Green.org), Ellen Young (Secretary of a Broad Alliance of Community groups, speaking in a personal capacity), Pete Cannell (RIC)

Ric Lander - The accumulation of capital affects the way we manage nature. The economics of neo-liberalism has led to more extreme weather over the past 20 years. The solution the corporations advocate is having a carbon market. Instead of regulation they argue for biodiversity offsetting. This approach has led to a relentless drive to utilise riskier and more marginal energy sources. They are now drilling in fragile environments like the Arctic, using the tar sands of Canada and fracking under peoples homes in the UK.

More and more investment is going into fuel extraction. Last week a conference was held at Edinburgh Council for pension fundholders, Despite the conference supposedly being about ethical investment, the talk was about the investment opportunities climate change would bring. One person even argued that because of the resultant increasing criminality this would create investment opportunities for new prisons!

For the past decade the main focus, even of many environmentalists, has been on emissions reductions. The supermarkets are happy with creating new 'green' products for sale.

There is a strong link between carbon emissions and personal wealth. Blaming individuals is the wrong approach. This even leads to reactionary demands for population controls. It is not the poor who have created the emissions problems but the rich.

The answer to this is Climate Justice. This recognises that the prime responsibility for climate change lies with by the richest in the North, not with the poorest in the South.

The next thing is for a Just Transition. When Thatcher moved against the mining industry whole communities were destroyed. Going for a just transition, when moving away from fossil fuels, means involving the communities and providing new jobs for those involved.

The UK is home to some of the major energy and mining companies like Shell, BP and Rio Tinto. They have massive influence and enjoy huge formal and cultural support. They are deeply resistant to being challenged and are in denial about the damage they do.

There are campaigning organisations like the London Mining Network which links indigenous communities and trade unions. There is currently a campaign at Edinburgh University against university funds being invested in fossil fuels.

Capitalism will turn every crisis to its own advantage. Whilst other societies have also suffered because of short termism and disregard for sustainability, neo-liberal capitalism is now threatening us all on a much greater scale.

Ellen Young said that the continued resort to gas production was bad for the climate. Fracking and other unconventional gas extraction also led to the use of toxic chemicals in the extraction, with dangers to groundwater, radioactive waste water and greatly increased methane emissions.

The Falkirk area has been one of the first to be subjected to fracking. However, at no point were the communities consulted. Indeed the planning applications were made under delegated powers, so that even the majority of councillors knew nothing about them.

When few people accidentally got wind of what was afoot, they organised within the community. They came up with a Community Mandate. This placed an emphasis on all the positive features of the community they wanted to preserve. They decided to challenge the fracking application.

The efforts of the community objecting to the planning application meant the process was escalated to a public enquiry. Dart Energy hired the same lawyer as Donald Trump while the anti-fracking group had to raise £75,000 through crowd funding to be able to afford a lawyer. The witnesses offered their services for free. The community campaign has had a considerable impact on the road to the current moratorium.

There is now a moratorium on fracking. However, this does not cover underground coal gasification. The date for the public consultation date has only been pushed back again and again. Groups are sceptical of the government's stance on fracking and there is lots of work to be done to convert the moratorium into a full ban.

Pete Cannell said that we needed to look into the science of climate change. The overwhelming majority of scientists say that climate change is happening, with the opposition more and more confined to the major corporations.

Pete said that he used to work on modelling non-linear systems with feedback mechanisms. As an example, temperature rises lead to the release of more methane into the atmosphere which in turn lead to an acceleration in temperature rises.

During the Ice Age there the carbon ratio was 185 per million. During Temperate periods it was about 280 per million. It has now risen to 400 per million.

Our generation is the one that will need to do something about this. Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything*, argues that the consequences of climate change are already with us, but will become worse over the next 20 years. There has been an increase in extreme weather events. This has an effect on food supplies and hence can lead to famines. However, the impact of this is uneven. It affects people according to their wealth. This could be seen with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The poorest people affected have still not returned.

Many people have focussed on the wars in the Middle East as the reason for the current wave of desperate migrants crossing the Mediterranean. One reason for these wars is the corporations desire to have strategic control over oil supplies. However, increasing numbers are fleeing countries like Chad, Niger and Sudan, which are undergoing desertification due to man-induced climate change.

Naval ships that have been sent to the Mediterranean are also carrying armed forces to take over Libyan ports. The US state is now talking about the opportunities that climate change provides to intervene militarily in even more areas of the world.

We may even be seeing the first Water Wars in places like Somalia.

We need to be able to show an alternative vision. The Campaign Against Climate Change has produced a pamphlet to show that current cost of military expenditure could fund the transition renewable energy.

There need to be campaigns to provide insulated homes, and to move over to public transport provision.

Scotland has plenty of renewable energy sources, particularly wind and wave.

However, such concerns should also run through all our campaigns, including anti-poverty and housing.

Discussion

Roger argued that controlling population was needed and cited the Chinese one child policy.

He also said that we are up against deliberate neo-liberal attempts to deny climate change.

Eric said there were also neo-liberals who liked to blame climate change on overpopulation. Ric had made it quite plain that it was the rich and the type of society they promoted that was responsible for climate change.

Jamie pointed out that there was a direct link between a person's wealth and their carbon footprint.

Donny said that the county responsible for most of the world's pollution wasn't the most populous, but the USA.

If capitalism is to blame, then capitalism must be overthrown and replaced by a system which is under democratic control. 384 people control half of the world's wealth.

The Greens don't address the capitalist roots of the problem.

Stephen pointed out how Ratcliffe had threatened Grangemouth with closure within 15 years unless fracking was accepted. The fear of unemployment is powerful. This is why it is necessary to provide an economic alternative, or a Green New Deal.

? asked if electronic cars are the answer.

? suggested if we adopted vegetarianism this would help.

Pete said that neo-liberalism can not solve the problems we face. However, we have to go beyond a merely propaganda socialist alternative. This is why we should integrate key environmental concerns into our other campaigns. We want to take the majority with us. The Referendum Campaign showed the possibilities of getting wider involvement.

Ric said that electronic cars may well be better than petrol powered cars. However, this approach is still too individualistic. The provision of public transport has far more potential in limiting emissions. A planned approach to transport provision, including cycling, was needed.

He also agreed that the less dependence on animals the fewer the carbon emissions.

He said that Edinburgh University denied that their investment policy should be subject to any democratic control. Similarly Pension Funds deny their investors any real say on how their money is spent. We needed to open up more democratic spaces.

He agreed that capitalism was the cause of the current problem.

Ellen agreed that the issue of jobs was important. However, she pointed out that within the G20 countries corporations received \$88 billion of public subsidies. Such vast sums of money could be invested in alternative jobs. Fracking only creates a minimum number of new jobs.

Ric said that people in Britain are currently amongst the most overworked. This affects people's health and leads to an unhappy, unequal society.

Allyson said that perhaps we needed to argue that it is not growth, or a higher GDP, that we need but increased redistribution.

Ric said that Nicola Sturgeon had been arguing that a less unequal society could also be a more productive society. The importance of this lies in a recognition that maybe we are measuring the wrong things. The SNP government has established a National Performance Framework which looked to other things other than just GNP. It included pollution, health and wellbeing. However, the SNP is still largely committed to economic growth.

Pete said this meeting tied in well with the last one where we discussed austerity. Growth could not be equated with improvement. Poverty could increase alongside growth.

Eric argued that research in Italy, comparing towns dominated by corporate business and those where there are more community, employee co-management firms, show that a reduction of inequality also leads to a reduction in conspicuous consumption.

Pat thanked the speakers for their contributions. She thought that perhaps the best way forward would be for Edinburgh RIC to create a Working Group like the Economics WG which had produced the pamphlet, *Myths, Lies and Austerity* or the WG that had led to the Living Rent Campaign. She asked for volunteers to see her at the end of the meeting.

Allyson suggested that perhaps a WG could address the issue of the Scottish Office's National Performance Framework.

Alan argued that climate change was such an important issue that it should form part of the ongoing Scottish Left Unity talks.