

Statement on Marxism and Sustainable Development
Third Annual Conference of the World Association for Political Economy
Langfang, China, May 23-25, 2008

Marx identified many potential sources of contradiction in the expansionary dynamic of capitalism. In examining the sources of crisis in capitalism, Marx did not ignore the pressures economic expansion could place on the natural environment. Nevertheless, the full scale of this potential contradiction was not yet visible in the 19th Century. A vibrant environmental movement emerged during the 1960's to address the growing damage being done by careless industrial practices in both the West and the East. Nevertheless, concern for the environment in this period remained a minority interest concentrated in the metropolitan regions of the world. In both the developed and less developed world, the environmental movement was often regarded as merely another special interest.

This situation has changed dramatically with the advent of neoliberal globalization. As capitalist industrial practices spread throughout the globe, the associated environmental problems were similarly dispersed and environment questions were actively posed for an increasing number of nations and an increasing portion of the global population. It has always been understood that environmental impacts had a strong global dimension and that many problems, like acid rain and water pollution, crossed national borders. Nevertheless, attention focused on local and national effects, and responses were generally national in character. All of this has changed with the emergence of an unassailable scientific consensus about the existence and serious consequences of human-made climate change.

It is not a coincidence that the present global environmental crisis has emerged in the context of a dramatic globalization of capitalist social relations. After centuries of relentless capitalist accumulation, the global environmental crisis has now developed to the point that the very survival of human civilization and perhaps humanity itself is at stake. The current global crisis cannot be fully resolved within the historical framework of capitalism, and global ecological sustainability will be possible only with fundamental social transformations and a new global economic system organized on the principles of social ownership of land and other major means of production, democratic and rational planning, and production for people's needs.

While standard economic theory has begun to discuss environmental and natural resource issues, it is incapable of incorporating the fundamental interdependence of the human economy and the natural environment into its world view. All production in the economy ultimately depends on the use of materials drawn from the natural world, and all waste from production and consumption eventually finds its way into the environment. These essential material realities and constraints are absent from standard economic theory. Just as crucially, standard economic theory is unable to envision alternative ways of organizing economic and social life.

The principles of ecological sustainability require that human society minimize the use of nonrenewable resources, maintain limited and steady flows of consumption of renewable resources, and maintain limited and steady releases of material wastes within the absorptive capacity of the environment. Market-driven decision-making, which tends to ignore "externalities," makes the achievement of this necessary state especially difficult. While it has not to date made the environment a central part of its analysis, Marxist political economy is better suited than the neoclassical tradition for dealing with environmental concerns. Its materialist tradition and its recognition that economic outcomes are not inevitable and instead are the concrete result of social relations prepare the Marxist tradition to grapple constructively with the current crisis.

The climate crisis makes the realization of the practice of sustainability especially urgent. Among all aspects of global environmental crisis, climate change is the most urgent and potentially has the most devastating consequences. Now it is nearly certain that the Arctic summer sea ice will disappear in a few years, suggesting that the processes of climate change have passed an important tipping point. With more tipping points being passed, global climate change could develop into a self-sustaining process beyond human control, leading to unprecedented catastrophes and leaving much of the earth no longer suitable for human habitation.

To alleviate the global climate crisis and prevent the worst catastrophes, it is necessary to begin immediately to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases. The developed economies must begin to realize concrete reductions while the less developed economies must begin to moderate their increases

and then follow the developed economies in making reductions. All countries must begin to move away from a development and production strategy based on the unrestrained consumption of fossil fuels. This will not only pose daunting challenges in the fields of energy and transportation but it will also require the rebuilding of world agriculture on a more organic and sustainable basis.

In addition, the scale of the climate crisis must not detract from a commitment to realize immediate gains on a number of other environmental fronts. These include, among others, water pollution, other forms of air pollution, the release of toxic wastes, species extinction, demographic problems, unsustainable resource exploitation, soil erosion, and desertification. It is necessary to take effective measures, from institutional, policy, technological, and psychological perspectives, to address the root causes of the ecological problems facing humankind as well as their surface manifestations.

Whatever the urgency of immediate actions, the scale of the changes needed will eventually clash with the expansionary needs of capitalism. Capitalism is an economic system based on production for profit and the universal dominance of market relations. Under the constant and pervasive pressure of market competition and driven by the insatiable pursuit of profit, individual capitalists, capitalist corporations, and capitalist states are constantly pursuing accumulation of capital on increasingly larger scales, leading to exponential growth of material consumption and material wastes. The capitalist system is thus fundamentally incompatible with the requirements of ecological sustainability. Neither technological change nor government regulations, without changing the basic framework of capitalism, can permanently overcome this insurmountable contradiction.

Fundamental global changes required for global ecological sustainability cannot be accomplished without a massive mobilization of the world's working classes and all oppressed peoples. The global struggle for ecological sustainability, therefore, must join forces with the global struggle against all forms of oppression and exploitation.

Only socialism and the global solidarity of all working peoples can free both humanity and the earth from the fatal threat of global capitalism.