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There is no parliamentary road to climate justice
January 27 2020

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*The following are a set of notes prepared for a talk presented at Students of Sustainability on 13 Jan 2020, originally titled "Anarchism 201: There is no parliamentary road to climate justice".*

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# There is no parliamentary road to climate justice

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**ourselves for a time. For, you must not forget, we can also build. It is we the workers who built these palaces and cities here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers, can build others to take their place. And better ones! We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth; there is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing this minute."**

Buenaventura Durruti, 1936.



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for anarchist revolution, because it is only through collective, mass disruption of the operation of capital and the state that the working class will be able to overcome the existing social, political and economic order.

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The task confronting us may seem immense, but the outlines of a way forward are clear.

We have to make and win the argument for a positive, working class, vision of climate justice, for everyone on planet earth.

There is no parliamentary road to this climate justice. The internal dynamic of capitalism necessarily generates massive and ongoing ecological destruction. Any attempt to overcome this will undermine the functioning of capitalism, and will encounter the massive and total resistance.

To overcome the social, political and economic systems that stand in our way, we have to build mass, directly democratic, participatory and grass roots organisation that spans the working class. As a class we have to build the confidence, capacity and awareness of our own strength and numbers.

To build this mass organisation, we have to make anarchist ideas the leading ideas in struggle. We have to win the arguments against authoritarianism, against reformism, against capitalism, and against all of the oppressive ideologies that sustain and buttress this system.

And we have to do all of this whilst fighting for climate action today.

In 1936, in the midst of the Civil War, the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti was told by a journalist, that even if you win "you will be sitting on a pile of ruins". Durruti responded:

> **"We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate**

of mass movement that enables the mass of people to struggle for themselves tomorrow.

We fight struggles for various reforms not only because they are worthwhile, but also because it is in the struggle for reforms today that the working class learns the skills, and develops the consciousness of its own power and capacity, in order to fight for revolution tomorrow.

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I just mentioned that the method of struggle we argue for is direct action. Direct action is a term much abused and misunderstood within both the environment movement and wider society in Australia.

The term "direct action" has its roots in the labour movement. Workers engage in direct action when they act for themselves, using their own power, rather than relying on this or that intermediary.

Direct action does not simply mean locking on, staging a sit in, and getting arrested (although it might).

Direct action occurs when workers themselves disrupt the continued operation of the capitalist firm or institution that is responsible for their complaint. Direct action is also collective act. An individual who goes on strike alone has simply quit their job.

This distinction is important. A lot of what gets called direct action in Australia amounts to little more than symbolic action, undertaken by small numbers of people, and directed at symbolic targets[17].

Recovering the term "direct action" matters because, in the struggle for reforms now, direct action is powerful in ways that various forms of symbolic action or appeal to outside authorities will never be. But this is also important to the program

[17] Recommended Reading, Non-violent Action: Direct and 'Direct', Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group, 2019.



So far this summer, 27 people have been killed, 10 million hectares of bush, forest and national park have burned, and more than 1800 houses have been destroyed[1]. As of Saturday there were 130 fires still burning across Australia, more than 50 of those fires remained uncontained.

The destruction we are experiencing today is the predicted and predictable result of climate change. Fortunately, governments around the world have been taking action on climate since at least the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and what action it has been!

As of November 2019, carbon concentration in the earth's atmosphere sits at 412 parts per million[2]. Global carbon emissions are due to hit 36.8 billion tonnes for 2019, a 62% increase since global climate negotiations began in 1990[3].

In 2016, governments around the world signed the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. The commitments that the world's governments have made to reduce carbon emissions, if they met them, would lock in planetary heating of 3.3 degrees. Business as usual on planet earth today would generate carbon emissions to lock in 4.2 degrees of heating[4], and the resultant feedback loops as the world's permafrost melts and carbon sinks break down, sees us heading for a +5 degree world[5].

In a four degree world, global food production would collapse, 2/3s of the glaciers that feed Asia's rivers would be lost, large parts of the equatorial region would become uninhabitable, and the vast majority of humanity would be forced to live in those high latitude zones where conventional agriculture would remain viable[6].

[1] As per this BBC article at 12 Jan 2020.
[2] NASA, 15 Jan 2020
[3] The Conversation, 4 Dec 2019
[4] Climate Interactive, 2020
[5] David Spratt, 18 August 2019
[6] David Spratt, 18 August 2019

It's a good thing that the world's governments are so committed to effective climate action!

## Capitalism

The destruction of our planet is no accident.

On planet earth today, a mere twenty firms are responsible for a third of all carbon emissions7. Coal, gas and oil giants like Chevron, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell extract and burn fossil fuels that powers almost all economic activity on our planet.

The social, economic and political system that generated these firms, and drives this economic activity, has a name. The massive ecological destruction that we have witnessed and are witnessing has its origins and drivers within the capitalist mode of production.

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Under capitalism, goods are produced so that they can be sold for a profit. Production occurs for profit.

Capitalist firms compete with each other to sell ever greater quantities of goods, in a race to reap ever greater profits.

If one firm is able to produce goods cheaper, it will sell them them more cheaply in order to seize a greater share of the market, and reap a greater proportion of the available profit. To keep up, all firms must produce more, at greater scale, in order to sell at lower prices and greater volume.

Each and every year, capitalism must consume more than it did the previous year, in order to produce more, sell more, and reap greater profits than the year before. We call this growth, and when capitalism is not growing it is in crisis. When capitalism is not growing, the pie available to capital is smaller, profit margins go negative, firms go bankrupt, and workers are driven into unemployment.



Having said all this, I can see the obvious objection.

We are in the midst of a climate emergency, survival demands that we fight for climate action today.

I wholeheartedly agree. We have to fight today, and the way way we fight will shape the possibilities open to us in the future.

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Anarchism does not propose sitting and waiting for a revolution.

Anarchists do not abstain from the struggle for reforms within the current political and economic system.

The challenge for anarchists is to embrace the fight for reforms, without succumbing to the trap of reformism[16]. By reformism, anarchists mean the idea that we can achieve the changes we need in the world by gradual or incremental steps within the current system.

There are reforms to be won within capitalism. And we need the reforms that we can win. There are forms of climate action that we can compel the existing states of the world to concede. But there will always be a limit, capitalism will never concede a reform that would genuinely disrupt the drive for profit.

The struggle for reforms is the mechanism by which we begin to build the mass movements of the working class that will be necessary to overcome capitalism.

Within this fight, anarchists argue for directly democratic, grass roots and participatory structures, no only because these structures will be more effective today, but also because our class needs these structures tomorrow.

Anarchists argue for direct action today, not only because direct action is more effective, but also because we want to build the kind

[16] Recommended Reading: 'Building Power and Advancing for Reforms not Reformism', Thomas Giovanni, 2013.

Any revolution of a minority will necessarily require creating and maintaining an apparatus of minority rule, in other words, it would require the creation of a state. With a state, no matter how revolutionary in rhetoric, would come a new ruling class, new rulers, new hierarchy, new domination and new exploitation.

In time, with a new state and a new ruling class, (once again trying to reap a surplus from the majority), a revolution by any minority will bring renewed ecological destruction.

To repeat, the anarchist revolution cannot be a revolution of anarchists, it must be a revolution of the working class, acting as itself, directly, and without intermediaries.

In order to act directly and for itself, the working class requires organisation.

The mass organisation of the working class cannot be a traditional political party, a command structure, or any form of centralised hierarchy.

No party, command structure or hierarchy will enable the working class to genuinely act for itself. Hierarchical organisations act in the interests of the individuals who control the hierarchy.

Mass organisation of the working class must be directly democratic, participatory, decentralised, and built from the grass roots. All positions of responsibility should be temporary, delegated, and re-callable.

The program of anarchism is therefore a program for mass, directly democratic, and combative working class organisation.

But mass organisation of the working class will not happen spontaneously. Anarchists must work to make anarchist ideas the leading ideas in struggle, or as it's sometimes expressed, to achieve a leadership of ideas.

We have to win the arguments for revolution, for working class mass democracy, and against authoritarian shortcuts of all kinds.

To do this, anarchists require specific political organisation. Alongside the project of mass organisation, we must also organise explicitly for our ideas.



The climate crisis is the logical outcome of this system of capitalist production. "Capitalism tends to destroy its two sources of wealth: nature and human beings"[7]. Every capitalist firm is bound by the logic of produce as much as you can, as cheaply as you can, using the cheapest inputs available, or be replaced by those who will.

## Parliamentary Roads?

The reality of the climate crisis demands action. To have a better than 50% chance of avoiding 1.5 degrees of global heating, we must achieve net zero emissions by approximately 2050[8].

To achieve this all we need to do is quit coal, phase out all other fossil fuels in our energy systems, decarbonise transportation, and substantially reverse global deforestation.

Given the scale and urgency of the task confronting us, it is worth considering what are the various roads to climate justice on offer, and what are their various prospects of success.

The overwhelming majority of the environment movement is grounded in the assumption that there is some form of parliamentary road to climate justice, ie. a way to achieve necessary action on climate within the constraints imposed by our current politics and economic system.

The most obvious example are the Australian Greens.

I am going to paint a picture in broad brush strokes.

The assumption that underpins capital-G Green politics is that it is possible to elect politicians on an ecological and social justice platform, and that those politicians will then be able to use the power of the state to undertake necessary climate action.

[7] Commonly attributed to Karl Marx, if anyone has the source I'd be grateful.

[8] World Resources Institute, 2019

Even if this Green political party is unable to win government, it should at least be able to occupy a position in the parliament where it can negotiate for worthwhile legislation addressing the climate crisis.

We have already seen the limits of Green politics in Australia.

A political party that needs to win elections within the current political system is constrained by the ideological and political boundaries of that system. The Greens strategy depends on getting elected now, and that compels them to adopt a political platform that is within the limits of political acceptability that exist now.

In 2010, when the Greens were able to form a de facto coalition with the Labor party, this meant a carbon cap-and-trade scheme (the so-called Carbon Tax) and moderate government investment in clean energy.

Plenty within the Greens and the wider environment movement still look back on this period and say, "well at least the carbon tax was better than nothing". Was it?

Carbon pollution cap-and-trade schemes involve the government establishing a "cap" on carbon emissions, and then establishing a market in which firms can buy and sell permits to pollute within that cap.

The same logic has long been applied to the management of Australia's river system. Permit systems turned water into a property right. Water rights worth billions are now traded on open markets, and any government that wants to return water to a river system is now forced to buy back these permits to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. Our rivers are drier than ever.

A carbon trading scheme turns pollution into a property right. Carbon markets enable speculators to make billions from this pollution, and if a government finally decides to further cut carbon pollution, polluters would have to be compensated for the loss of their property!

The Greens embraced a cap-and-trade carbon tax because they are bound by the logic of parliamentary politics. The Greens under-



There is only one group that can muster the social force necessary to overcome this absolute and total resistance. The revolution against capitalism has to be a working class revolution.

I want to take a brief detour here to say one or two things about the idea of the working class.

First, when we say "working class" we are not referring to an identity. "Working class" refers to a position in relation to the capitalist mode of production.

Narrowly defined the working class includes all people who do not own a portion of the means of production, and who sell their ability to labour to capitalists in exchange for a wage.

More broadly defined, a reasonable definition of the working class also includes all unemployed workers, most students, and all people otherwise excluded from the labour force who do not have access to the means of production.

The working class is global, it is rural and urban, it is concentrated in the global south, it is by a narrow majority non-male, and it is overwhelmingly non-white.

In the Australian context, over twenty percent of the working class is tertiary educated, over twenty percent speak a language other than English, and twice as many are employed in healthcare than manufacturing. A sizeable majority of the organised working class (union members) in Australia is non male.

Anyone who claims that the working class is strictly white, male, English speaking and employed in 'blue collar industry' needs a reality check.

The working class are the overwhelming majority of society who have the least to gain from the continuation of capitalism.

The revolution that anarchists argue for is a revolution by the working class, acting for itself, without intermediaries.

It may seem like a contradiction, but one of the things anarchists are against is a revolution undertaken *by the anarchists*. We oppose the control of any political minority, even our own.

Our program for climate justice is the abolition of capitalism, and our program for the abolition of capitalism is the anarchist revolution[15].

The word 'revolution' will doubtless cause many to scoff. On the surface, the political and economic situation in Australia couldn't appear less favourable to the revolutionary. The 'common sense' position is that capitalism is the only political and economic system that is possible, and that revolution is impossible.

But contrary to popular belief, Australia is not an island. Australia is just one state within a capitalist world-system, and contrary to what capitalists would like you to believe, revolutions have happened, do happen, and will continue to happen.

2019 has been a year of uprising, revolt and revolution. Mass uprisings have shaken the political order from Sudan to Chile, and from Hong Kong to Iraq. The real question is how far will any revolution go, and what are its prospects for success.

Unfortunately, no ruling class, no political and economic system, surrenders its existence willingly. A political revolution against this or that government can expect every person who benefits from the continuation of the government in question to resist their revolution with the means at their disposal.

But in political revolutions, at some point, counter-revolutionaries cut their losses, and seek an accommodation.

The revolution we propose will enjoy no such luxury. Anarchists do not simply want to overthrow one ruling class and replace them with another, we demand the abolition of the very existence of a ruling class.

In order to win a world worth living on, we have to muster the forces necessary to overcome the absolute and total resistance of all of the forces who benefit (or think they benefit) from the present political and economic system. There can be no compromise.

[15] Recommended Reading: 'Our Program is the Anarchist Revolution!', Wayne Price, 2006.



stood that a carbon tax would not have delivered sufficient action on climate, it may have contributed to locking in failure, but it was at the limits of what was politically possible within our existing political and economic system.

The carbon tax is not dead. The mainstream position of the Australian state is currently climate denial, but that won't hold. As the climate crisis continues to intensify, denialism will become increasingly untenable, and capital will re-embrace these sorts of neoliberal market solutions.

For capitalism, far better a cap-and-trade scheme that allows you to claim carbon credits for building palm oil plantations in Indonesia than to countenance mass publicly owned renewable energy.

## Green New Deals

Of course, not everyone within the Greens embraces this vision of Green-neoliberalism, far from it.

As we gather here today there is a growing left to the environment movement which draws inspiration from the apparent rebirth of parliamentary socialism in Britain, the United States and parts of the European Union.

More people are demanding a response to the climate crisis which centres public investment in renewable energy and transport infrastructure as part of a package of policies towards a so-called just transition.

In the United States, Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have broken with the neoliberal rhetoric of the rest of the Democratic Party and are promising to deliver a ten-year Green New Deal.

The campaigns of Jeremy Crobyn in Britain and Bernie Sanders in the United States have pushed against the limits of what is pos-

sible within the confines of existing political economic structures, but they cannot escape their logic.

For all the talk of socialism the Green New Deal of AOC and Sanders is a plan to save capitalism from its failure to act on climate. There is a reason AOC's Green New Deal is soft on both nuclear[9] and fracking[10], there is a reason she won't support abolition of ICE, or an end to migrant detention and deportation in practice[11].

If by some miracle Sanders wins both the Democractic primary and the US Presidential election, a Sanders presidency would be forced to make ever more concessions to the reality of US politics[12].

Well, he would make ever more concessions to reality or face the same problem as every principled socialist elected to high office before him, the unrelenting and total opposition of all of the forces that benefit from the existing state of affairs. Just ask Salvador Allende.

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There is another way to understand and relate to the idea of Green New Deal[13].

As a movement, it is not enough to say that dramatic action on climate is needed now.

[9] Ocasio-Cortez: Green New Deal 'Leaves the Door Open' on Nuclear, Morning Consult, 6 June 201910

[10] Recommended reading, 'A Green New Deal vs Revolutionary Eco-Socialism', Wayne Price, 4 Jan 2019.

[11] AOC's rhetoric on Abolish ICE is strong, but her concrete policy propositions amount to "abolish and replace". See 'Abolishing ICE by funding it', Rosa Negra, 8 Jan 2019

[12] Check out the Rosa Negra Reader, 'Socialist Faces in High Places'.

[13] This section was not delivered in part because my co-presenter argued, reasonably, against the position, putting that we need to keep the reformist rhetoric of the Green New Deal separate from the need for a plan for the revolutionary reconstruction of society to address the climate crisis. I am not sure I agree, and would argue the discourse is still worth critically engaging with.



We genuinely need to advance a more or less detailed plan for a just transition. We do need to map out what sufficient action on climate might look like, what it might consist of, and what it would mean.

We need a Green New Deal worth fighting for. For two decades the environment movement has made the argument that our world faces existential threats, and that urgent action is necessary. The opponents of climate action have parried this argument by projecting action on climate as a plan for privation and poverty. The refusal of mainstream environmentalism to even countenance an anti-capitalist position, and to instead focus on individual demands for self-sacrifice, has played into the hands of ecocide whilst diverting blame and attention from the economic and political system that is destroying the planet.

To win the argument for climate action we need a positive vision for the world in which climate justice has been won, and we need a plan for how it can be achieved.

But we should have no illusions that we can win such a plan within the confines of the existing political and economic system[14].

We should instead be unashamedly making the case that a political and economic system that will not and cannot deliver a world worth living on, must be abolished.

## The Anarchist Revolution

There is no parliamentary road to climate justice. There is no solution to the climate crisis within the limits of our present political and economic system. Capitalism necessarily generates ever increasing ecological destruction, and as such, capitalism must be abolished.

[14] Recommended Reading: Lucy Parsons, Address to the founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1905.]]