

Jump on our bandwagon

The left must see that only environmentalism has the power to restrain global corporations

Beside the disaster in Iraq, the new Islamist terror campaign and the battle over immigration policy, the survival of the black-browed albatross may not look like the most pressing political issue. For many of those on the left, environmentalism is at a best a distraction, at worst a regression. As Christopher Hitchens said in a debate last week: “Environmentalism and ecology... are conservative positions. They may be honourable ones, they may be defensible ones, they are not radical ones.”

This was once true. The modern European green movement began as a response by landowners to the rise of the middle class and the industries which empowered it. Industrialism threatened both the landscapes which reflected an unchanging social order and the aristocracy’s economic control.

Today, it would be foolish to claim that this tendency has entirely disappeared. Much of the movement’s funding in this country is provided by people with inherited wealth, the most prominent of whom, Teddy Goldsmith, happily describes himself as a reactionary. By reasserting the traditional Tory policy of trade protectionism, the British Green party, which in other respects is a radical force, finds itself allied to such ultra-conservative bodies as America First.

But while some of the policies of its adherents haven’t changed, the political meaning of environmentalism has. Corporations have become the new aristocracy: an enthroned power which shows no sign of being usurped from within. Far from becoming a catalyst for revolutionary change, they have ensured that all that once

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melted into air becomes solid, as intangible assets – the genome, the internet, even the weather – are bound up by a new generation of property rights. Financial speculators establish the limits of political action: if a government steps over the political line and “loses the confidence of the markets”, the economy collapses, and the government soon follows.

Their world order is as dangerous to social welfare as feudalism. While industrialisation still has liberating potential for poorer nations, its global impact on the climate means that it could now destroy more lives than it saves. Environmentalism and social justice have become indivisible. To ignore the environmental impacts of economic decisions, as some on the left still do, is to ignore one of the major sources of oppression.

This is not to say that the classic leftist analysis of power relations has become redundant. At the global level we can discern a dialectic of precisely the kind Marx foresaw. As the same corporations seek to enforce the same conditions everywhere, they create a universal class interest in confronting them. No one needs to persuade the people fighting Monsanto in Britain that they have common cause with the people fighting Monsanto in Bangladesh or Bolivia. But because the corporations have so effectively crushed the global workforce, much of the pressure for change now comes from outside the factory gates.

Partly as a result of the changes they have engineered, partly as a result of the depletion of natural resources, the corporations now appear to be more vulnerable to environmental protest than they are to industrial action. Having exhausted the most accessible reserves of oil, minerals, timber, fish and freshwater, they are now forced into ever wider conflicts with the local people whose land and water they must seize to maintain production. As a result, the theft of resources and the ensuing pollution have become major political issues almost everywhere.

At the same time, the drive to cut labour costs and find new markets requires constant technological innovation. Science in countries like Britain has been subordinated to the corporate demand for profitable new technologies. To deploy these technologies, companies must also demand ever-lower regulatory standards. These are the reasons why science policy has become such a battleground, and why so many of those who claim to be defending science instead appear to be defending corporate power.

The limiting factor for corporations, in other words, is no longer labour, but the ecosystem and the regulations which protect it. This is why battles over the environment are among the few that the world’s dissident movements are winning.

This might seem an odd thing to say, at a time when climate change seems to be

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accelerating, the US government insists on raising the production of an ozone-destroying chemical, and a new UN report suggests that vast “dead zones” caused by sewage and farm pollution are spreading across the oceans. But over the past week in Britain alone we’ve won four resounding victories.

Last Tuesday, Bayer, the company which just a month ago received permission to start growing GM maize commercially in Britain, pulled out. This means that no GM crops can be grown in Britain until at least 2008, and perhaps never. On Thursday, the European commission, having prevaricated for 14 years, ordered the nuclear power station at Sellafield to clear up the plutonium it has been dumping. Since the 1950s Sellafield is believed to have thrown 1.3 tonnes of plutonium – enough to make 162 atom bombs – into an open pond.

On Friday executives from the Lafarge conglomerate visited the Hebridean island of Harris to announce that they had abandoned their plans to turn Mount Roineabhal, part of a protected landscape, into roadstone. The mountain, according to one of the quarry’s backers, would have become the biggest hole in the world.

On Saturday, the British Foreign Office, after threatening to sink it, finally dropped its objections to a new treaty, enforceable in British territorial waters in the south Atlantic, protecting albatrosses from longline fishermen. So many albatrosses were being caught on baited hooks that all 21 species are now threatened with extinction.

In all these cases, victory against some of the world’s biggest corporations was achieved by small groups of local people and roving campaigners, armed with a tiny fraction of their opponents’ budgets. They haven’t liberated the working class from oppression, but they have restrained the power of the oppressors. These are victories for the common people against the new aristocracy.

Nothing so undermines a cause as repeated failure. By showing that we can win against great odds, we revitalise the campaign not only against environmental destruction, but against other forms of oppression. Those leftists who still see environmentalism as someone else’s mobilisation are missing a massive opportunity.

But if these victories are to spread, then both sides need to be more consistent. The Green party, for example, claims to support the doctrine of “contraction and convergence”, in which the use of resources by the different nations converges to equality. Yet it seeks, through protectionism, to prevent the transfer of manufacturing and service jobs from rich nations to poor which would assist this process. Similarly, if the traditional left is to take a truly internationalist position, it must cease to press for the kind of development at home which, through climate change, destroys the lives of other people. If the greens junk their past and the reds grasp their future, the new aristocracy will find itself in serious trouble. #