

The Fires This Time and Their Implications for Ecosocialists

“Deindustrialization.” That’s a word you virtually never hear in the debate around global warming. Not surprising. It’s a word that’s loaded with negative implications: economic collapse, mass layoffs, falling living standards. Who wants to think about those, let alone think about this as a strategy of suppressing CO2 emissions?



Imagine suggesting to the next oil driller, auto worker or airline flight attendant you run into that the only way to stop global warming is stop producing oil, park the cars, and ground the airplanes. Even the word “degrowth” is beyond the pale of thinkable thought in mainstream discourse. Yet we had better start thinking and talking and organizing around this strategy because, as is becoming more and more apparent, deindustrialization is the only means to avert global ecological collapse. If we do not organize a rationally-planned partial but very substantial deindustrialization of the overindustrialized nations of the North including China, Mother Nature is going to do it for us in a much less pleasant manner and we will face the prospect of the collapse of civilization in this century.

If humanity had taken serious steps to reduce emissions decades ago in the 1980s when climate scientists began warning us (as the *New York Times* magazine of last weekend reminds us) then perhaps we wouldn't be in the fix we're in right now. But we didn't and haven't and so now scientists tell us we face a CLIMATE EMERGENCY. For decades the developed economies of the

world and the rogue party-state of China have ignored the threat of global warming and kicked the can down the road on the assumption "dangerous" global warming is not imminent or not much of a threat to them at least in the near future. After all, we in the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere have not suffered so much because the heating is more extreme at the poles than the temperate latitudes. The Arctic and Antarctica are melting very fast, with immediate and dire implications for the whole world. And global warming is hitting the neo-tropical Middle East, India and Africa very hard. But in the U.S. all the media talks about is increased flooding along coastlines, more frequent droughts in the West and Southwest, more fires in the west and so on.

But this summer, the belt of furious fires all around the northern hemisphere from California to Greece to Japan which cost the lives of hundreds has finally grabbed public attention, even the media. I don't know if this is the first time that the *Times* even published an article on global warming on the front page (above the fold) but I believe this is the first time it has explicitly blamed global warming for the fires this time in a top-of-the-page headline. And this is only the beginning. As climate scientist Michael Mann is quoted in the lead editorial of the *Times* of August 10th: "What we call an 'extreme heat wave' today we will simply call 'summer' in a matter of decades if we don't sharply reduce carbon emissions."

Yet from the first warnings of scientists and the first efforts to come up with plans to restrain emissions, all efforts to reduce emissions have been subordinated to maximizing economic growth: Whatever we do, we MUST NOT slow economic growth. Or, as George Bush Sr. put it: "We will never sacrifice the American way of life." So instead of simply imposing rationing of fossil fuels, suppressing vehicle production, grounding civilian aircraft (all of which President Roosevelt did during WWII), all mainstream efforts

from the voluntary curbs of Kyoto in the 1990s to the cap & trade schemes of the 2000s to the carbon tax schemes of today, have been explicitly premised on the assumption that they must not impede growth. In other words, they were all designed to fail. Which they have. In result, as global economic growth soared since the 1980s, so have emissions. So now what?

We certainly can't expect any change from the powers that be. So long as we live under capitalism, governments, industries, industrial unions, as well as most workers and consumers will continue to prioritize growth over saving the planet because, given capitalism, what else can they do? The planet may collapse tomorrow but degrowth or deindustrialization would mean I'm out of a job today. This is how we drive off the cliff to collapse – “unless” (as the Lorax said) . . .

Unless we change the conversation. Unless we get people to start thinking about and talking about and working for a viable alternative to the market-driven collapse of civilization. Our job, as ecosocialists is to put forward a practical plan to slam the brakes on emissions, an EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY. This plan has to begin with brutal honesty:

1. WE CAN'T HAVE AN INFINITELY GROWING ECONOMY ON A FINITE PLANET. This growth-till-we-bust logic “worked” in Adam Smith's day. But today, this is the road to collective suicide. All mainstream efforts to suppress emissions while maintaining economic growth have failed. The only way to suppress emissions is to suppress emissions: impose firm caps, impose rationing *regardless of the impact on the economy*. We have to say this, and hammer this point home relentlessly. People and planet have to take priority over profit or we're doomed.
2. WE CAN'T SUPPRESS EMISSIONS WITHOUT CLOSING DOWN COMPANIES. Suppressing emissions means closing down the producers of those emissions – the oil companies, auto manufacturers, power plants, chemical companies,

construction companies, airlines, etc. According to the EPA in the U.S. the largest generators of CO2 emissions are transportation (28.5%), energy (mainly electricity generation) 28.4%, manufacturing 22%, construction 11%, industrial farming 9%. We have to say to people "Sorry, but lots of companies, beginning with fossil fuel producers but also fossil fuel-based companies will have to be shut down or drastically retrenched. It's either that or your children are going to burn up in an uninhabitable planet." This is the *only way to suppress emissions in brief window of opportunity we still have left*. There is no other alternative.

3. WE NEED TO SOCIALIZE THOSE COMPANIES, NATIONALIZE THEM, BUY THEM OUT AND TAKE THEM INTO PUBLIC HANDS SO WE CAN PHASE THEM OUT OR RETRENCH THEM. ExxonMobil, General Motors, United Airlines, Monsanto and Cargill can't put themselves out of business even to save the planet because they're owned by private shareholders. Either we save the companies (till the planet collapses) or we take them over and put them out of business or reduce their production to sustainable levels.
4. IF WE CLOSE DOWN/RETRENCH INDUSTRIES THEN SOCIETY MUST PROVIDE NEW LOW- OR NO-CARBON JOBS FOR ALL THOSE DISPLACED WORKERS AND AT COMPARABLE WAGES AND CONDITIONS. Corporations, typically limited to one line or field of production, like oil production for example, can't be expected provide new jobs in an entirely different field for displaced workers and have no mandate to do so. Society has do this. Otherwise those workers will not be able to see their way to joining with us to do what we have to do to save them and their children.
5. WE HAVE TO REPLACE OUR ANARCHIC MARKET ECONOMY WITH A LARGELY, THOUGH NOT ENTIRELY, PLANNED ECONOMY, A BOTTOM-UP DEMOCRATICALLY-PLANNED ECONOMY. The environmental, social and economic problems we face cannot be solved individual choices in the marketplace. They require

collective democratic control over the economy to prioritize the needs of society and the environment. And they require national and international economic planning to reorganize and restructure our economies and redeploy labor and resources to those ends. In other words, if humanity is to save itself, we have to overthrow capitalism and replace it with some form of democratic eco-socialism.

This is the public conversation the whole nation and the whole world needs to be having right now. There is no other alternative. It's up to us ecosocialists to motivate this conversation because no mainstream organization is willing to risk challenging the government, capitalism, unions, workers, and consumers, let alone taking them on all together. Yet the abject failure of all mainstream approaches opens the way for us to put forward more radical approaches to a mass audience. Awful as things are at the moment, this presents a huge opportunity to ecosocialists. But we really need to get moving on this, develop educational materials of all kinds from videos to bumper strips, organize forums, teach-ins, write opinion pieces, and develop ecosocialist politics within the rapidly growing 48,000-member Democratic Socialists of America, and so on.

Richard Smith is a founder of SystemChangeNotClimsteChange.org and a member of the New York City chapter of Democratic Socialists of America and the national DSA Climate and Environmental Justice Working Group.

A version of this article first appeared as a contribution to a thread on SCNCC.net, a discussion forum. If you would like to see the whole thread and join the discussion, click here.