

# What next for ecosocialists?

Thursday 2 September 2010, by [ANGUS Ian](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2010).

**The Ecosocialist International Network will meet in Paris, Sept. 26-27, to discuss its future and the way forward for ecosocialism. This article is a contribution to that discussion.**

Not long ago, most socialists had little to say about environmental issues, and the environmental movement was focused on individual (change your light bulbs) and capitalist (create a market for emissions) solutions to the ecological crisis.

In 2007, immediately after the founding of the Ecosocialist International Network, I wrote a *Canadian Dimension* article on the challenges facing ecosocialists. In it, I discussed two parallel trends that, though in their infancy, seemed to portend a new wave of anti-capitalist and pro-ecology action.

- \* Some socialists were moving away from the left's abstention from the environmental movement, and attempting to develop a distinctly socialist approach to the global environmental crisis.

- \* Some greens were growing disillusioned with the pro-corporate agenda of the mainstream Green Parties and NGOs, and expressing interest in radical alternatives.

Those trends have not just continued — they have accelerated and deepened in the past three years. Our ability to respond effectively will, I believe, determine whether ecosocialism lives up to the promise we saw three years ago.

## **A Mass Green Left**

The most important development has been the rapid growth of the climate justice movement, raising the possibility of a global mass movement against climate change.

This potential was manifested powerfully in Copenhagen last December, when the largest climate change demonstrations ever held in Europe challenged the business-as-usual policies of the world's largest polluters. Militant actions by 100,000 people — double the number expected by the organizers — proved that it is possible to develop mass mobilizations on the issue of global warming.

The sequel to Copenhagen — the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth — brought over 35,000 people to Cochabamba, Bolivia. It forged unprecedented unity between mass anti-imperialist movements in Latin America, indigenous activists from around the world, and the burgeoning climate justice movement in the north.

The conference adopted the most radical program put forward by any significant section of the environmental movement in decades. The "Peoples' Agreement" declared:

"Under capitalism, Mother Earth is converted into a source of raw materials, and human beings into consumers and a means of production, into people that are seen as valuable only for what they own, and not for what they are. ... Humanity confronts a great dilemma: to continue on the path of

capitalism, depredation, and death, or to choose the path of harmony with nature and respect for life.”

Cochabamba and Copenhagen were initial manifestations of a new alliance that includes indigenous groups, radical environmentalists, justice campaigners, labor unions, socialists, and a host of other fighters for social change. If that alliance continues, it could pose a real challenge to the power of the climate vandals.

### **Greening the Left?**

At the same time, most of socialist groups that once dismissed the environment as a middle class diversion have reconsidered. Today it would be hard to find a socialist organization anywhere in the world that hasn't published a statement, pamphlet or book describing the environmental crisis and explaining its roots in capital's insatiable drive for profit.

But it's one thing to analyze the causes of environmental destruction. It is quite another to translate that understanding into action. In my 2007 article, I wrote

*“Most socialist writing about climate change does a good job of analyzing the nature and causes of the problem, and a terrible job of explaining about what to do now. All too often, a stirring condemnation of capitalism is followed by a simple assurance that socialism will solve the problem. How socialism will come about and what socialists should do about climate change now, those are unexplained mysteries.”*

While this continues to be a weakness of left commentary on the environment, in an increasing number of countries socialists are playing key roles in building the movements against climate change. The entire global left can learn much from Australia, England, and the countries in continental Europe where real red-green alliances are growing.

### **Does the EIN Have a Future?**

What, then, of the organization that seemed so promising three years ago? The Ecosocialist International Network, said the group's initial announcement, is

*“united in the belief that if we are to have a worthwhile future, the whole world needs to come together to drive capitalism from the stage and create an alternative society based on principles of social and environmental justice as well as popular participation.”*

Where is it today?

Since 2007, EIN supporters have organized successful sessions at the World Social Forum in Brazil and the alternative KlimaForum in Copenhagen, and this year at the Cochabamba conference on Mother Earth and the U.S. Social Forum. The Belem Ecosocialist Declaration [[The Belem Ecosocialist Declaration](#)] is available in six languages and has been signed by activists from nearly 40 countries: though far from perfect, it offers a workable basis for unity among the wide range of people who call themselves ecosocialists.

In general, these successes reflect the activity of ad hoc groups of activists acting in the EIN's name rather than any coordinated effort by the EIN as such. The organization's very loose structure has limited its ability to decide on actions and carry them through.

In fact, while there appears to be broad agreement on the analysis and political perspectives outlined in the Belem Declaration, there is no apparent consensus on what practical activities the

EIN should initiate or support, or whether it should initiate any at all. Given the failures of many other “internationals,” many ecosocialists believe that the EIN should not try to be more structured, that it should just provide an open framework for discussion and communication, while leaving any actual actions to local initiatives. In addition to meeting an important political need, such an approach seems realistic in view of the EIN’s still limited resources.

An EIN session held during the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in June discussed some of these questions, and took initial steps were taken towards the formation of chapters in North America. An international organizing meeting, planned for Paris in September [\[1\]](#), may provide more clarity about the EIN’s long-term direction.

## **Unite for climate justice**

In my view, the most important issue facing ecosocialists today is not whether a specific organization succeeds or fails, or whether a given resolution passes some socialist purity test.

The real question is: Will ecosocialists support the Cochabamba program and similar initiatives to build a global climate justice movement, or will we remain on the sidelines?

As we expected three years ago, the mainstream NGO-dominated ecological movement has lost its way and a growing number of activists now understand that the “market-mechanism” approach is an anti-ecological fraud.

At the same time, our basic *raison d’être* — the urgent need for a mass movement for climate justice on an anti-capitalist axis — has been given life by Copenhagen and Cochabamba. A real anti-capitalist green movement is being built outside of the traditional socialist movement and outside the established environmental groups. The climate justice activists, whatever their weaknesses and inadequacies, have begun the hard work of building a global mass movement against capitalist ecocide.

Socialists who actually want to change the world need to understand, as Canadian ecosocialist Steve D’Arcy wrote last year, that participation in building such real social movements is the only way forward:

*“It is there — at the point of intersection between struggles for social justice and economic democracy on the one hand, and struggles for ecological sustainability and other broadly ‘environmental’ issues on the other hand — that ecosocialism must take root. It is these struggles that will pose the questions, in the minds of activists, to which ecosocialism can begin to suggest answers. If ecosocialism is to be a living political current, it will have to live within the ‘medium’ of mass struggles for social and environmental justice.”*

Karl Marx famously wrote that, “every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs.” As Copenhagen and Cochabamba showed, a real movement is stepping out, right now.

=====

## **SIDEBAR: The Green Mainstream: Still Rightward Bound**

The growth of the radical climate justice movement is in part a response to the headlong rightward drive of mainstream environmentalist groups.

Last year, for example, ten of Canada’s largest environmental groups last year brought shame to their names by giving an environmental award to British Columbia’s fossil fuel promoting premier,

Gordon Campbell.

More seriously, nine environmental NGOs this year agreed to stop all criticism of Canadian forestry companies in exchange for a non-binding promise to defer logging in some areas until April Fools Day, 2012. The deal was negotiated behind the backs of the indigenous communities whose homelands include those forests.

In a few parts of the world, the Green Parties are still to the left of the social-democrats, but in most places they are explicitly pro-capitalist. In Canada, where the Green Party's grandest hope is to someday elect one MP this quest for respectability is just sad. But in countries where they are stronger — Germany, Ireland and the Czech Republic for example — they have joined right-wing parliamentary coalitions and supported harsh neo-liberal policies.

As Christine MacDonald writes in Green Inc., major environmental groups have become “the minions of corporations” by “taking corporate dollars and giving corporate executives the keys to the boardrooms.

**Ian Angus**

---

---

**P.S.**

\* from Canadian Dimension, September-October 2010.

\* Ian Angus is editor of [climateandcapitalism.com](http://climateandcapitalism.com) and a founding member of the Ecosocialist International Network. His most recent book is *The Global Fight for Climate Justice* (Fernwood 2010).

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://ecosocialistnetwork.org/>