

On Naomi Klein' "Capitalism vs. The Climate": "Only mass social movements can save us"

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A review of *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* by Naomi Klein (Alfred A Knopf, 2014).

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Despite endless conferences, treaties and solemn promises, greenhouse gas emissions have risen 61% since 1990, and the rate of increase is accelerating. As Naomi Klein tells us in her new book, *This Changes Everything*, we are now experiencing an “early twenty-first century emissions explosion.”

The reason for this ominous failure, she shows, is that the present capitalist profit system itself is incompatible with climate and environmental stability. Our only hope is the rise of mass movements with the combined goals of saving the environment and achieving social justice.

This Changes Everything is a rich resource of fact and argument: it's a book that every climate justice activist should read, use and share.

‘The Right is right’

Klein begins with a 2011 conference of prominent and well-financed U.S. climate deniers, whose main objection, she discovered, was not to the science of global warming but to the radical implications of actions to rein it in. Such measures require “heavy-duty interventions: sweeping bans on polluting activities, deep subsidies for green alternatives.... Everything, in short, that these think tanks ... have been busily attacking for decades.” For many conservatives, she adds, quoting Australian scholar Robert Manne, climate science is “an affront to their deepest and most cherished basic faith: the capacity and indeed the right of ‘mankind’ to subdue the Earth and all its fruits and

to establish a 'mastery' over nature."

These hard-core rightist ideologues, Klein concludes, understand the significance of climate change better than most of those in the political center, "who are still insisting that the response can be gradual and painless."

The free market trumps climate

Mainstream political leaders like Barack Obama and (grudgingly) Stephen Harper, acknowledge the climate crisis and tell us they are responding to it. For 35 years they have claimed to be working to reduce carbon emissions. Klein leads off her extended analysis of their record - and that of their allies among pro-establishment environmental NGOs - by describing the devastating impact of the trade treaties that now bind the governments of all major states.

"Green energy programs - the strong ones that are needed to lower global emissions fast - [are] increasingly being challenged under international trade agreements," Klein says. Major powers are launching lawsuits against each other's wind and solar energy programs citing the provisions in these plans encouraging local sourcing of green energy equipment.

The U.S. has launched such suits against India, challenging its ambitious solar energy program, and against China, over wind power. And yet, with brazen hypocrisy, Washington denounces China and India at the United Nations for not doing enough to cut emissions, claiming this as an excuse for U.S. inaction.

The people of Ontario fell victim to such an attack, Klein notes. The province's climate action plan, the Green Energy Act, created 31,000 jobs in the local solar and wind power industry between 2009 and 2014, but when it was challenged by the European Union and Japan as a violation of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, "the province wasted little time in nixing the local content rules."

The renewable energy programs in question represent the governments' attempts, inadequate to be sure, to carry out promises made during world climate negotiations. Yet they are being snuffed out by these same governments on the basis of trade treaties.

"The trade and climate negotiations closely paralleled one another, each winning landmark agreements within a couple of years." World Trade Organization negotiations concluded in 1994; the Kyoto protocol on reducing carbon emissions was adopted three years later. The treaties are two solitudes — each seemed to "actively pretend that the other did not exist."

Yet it was clear from the start which treaty would prevail in case of conflict. The Kyoto protocol "effectively functioned on the honour system," while the WTO agreement was "enforced by a dispute settlement system with real teeth," often enforcing harsh penalties.

Thus asymmetry was built in from the start: trade deals were the foundation of the new "globalized" world order, while climate agreements have been little more than public relations exercises.

Globalization's dirty underside

The trade system has other less obvious but more damaging climate impacts. Food production, for example, accounts for between 19% and 29% of world carbon emissions but the treaties have "helped to entrench and expand the energy-intensive, higher-emissions model of industrial

agriculture around the world.”

Similarly, the massive shift of manufacturing to low-wage less-developed countries, with inefficient energy industries, has led to an increase in emissions. Swedish researcher Andreas Malm points to “a causal link between the quest for cheap and disciplined labor power and rising CO₂ emissions.”

Significantly, climate agreements measure emissions in the country where products are manufactured, not where they are consumed. Thus about half of China’s carbon emissions are export-related. By outsourcing, rich countries have in effect exported their emissions.

Betrayed by Big Green

Unfortunately some major environmental groups supported the new trade deals. When the NAFTA treaty was debated in the early 1990s, a strong coalition of unions and environmental groups rallied to lead a massive opposition to the deal, and “for a time it even looked as if they would win.” At that point, proponents of the deal tacked on two “toothless” side agreements, one for labor and one for environmentalists.

“The labor movement knew better than to fall for this ploy,” Klein says, but leaders of many large environmental organizations capitulated. Some groups held firm, including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Sierra Club, but U.S. President Bill Clinton was still able to claim that “groups representing 80% of national [environmental] group membership have endorsed NAFTA.”

Klein devotes many pages to a much-needed exposé of Big Green, the conservative environmental groups. Over time, she demonstrates, many NGOs and foundations fell under the domination of the extractive corporations whose power they were set up to contest, and now contribute to greenwashing oil-industry operations. The Nature Conservancy, for example, partners with BP and JP Morgan in fracking development, and has even drilled its own gas well in the middle of one of its Texas nature preserves.

Toward solidarity-based trade

“It is not too late for a new kind of climate movement to take up the fight against so-called free trade,” Klein says, calling for transfer of resources and green technology to developing countries and measures to support, not penalize renewable energy.

She could also have pointed to the success of mass hemisphere-wide opposition in quashing the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), one of the most dangerous of these schemes, a movement in which she played a prominent role. Although she doesn’t mention it, that campaign contributed to the formation of what might be called the anti-FTAA, a trade and cultural alliance based on solidarity – the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), which includes Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Klein criticizes the dependence of majority-indigenous Bolivia on exports generated by extractive industries. However, as Klein herself says elsewhere of many indigenous peoples’ deals with extractive industries, they face “a paucity of good choices”; at present extraction may be essential to maintenance of sovereignty. Westerners who want poverty-stricken natives to swear off extraction for the world’s sake must ask, she says, “What are we going to do for them?”

Despite their poverty, some ALBA nations have registered significant climate achievements, such as

Nicaragua's program to produce 70% of its electricity by renewable energy. Indeed, ALBA's very existence is step forward along the path Klein outlines.

Stranded assets

The sense of unreality surrounding world climate negotiations is reinforced by Klein's observations on oil and gas corporations' balance sheets. To maintain stable share prices, Klein notes, these companies must demonstrate that they have sufficient untapped reserves to replace current wells when their production declines. "It is this structural imperative that is pushing the industry into the most extreme forms of dirty energy," she says.

Currently, the total amount of carbon in oil, gas, and coal reserves is valued at about \$27 trillion – more than half again as much as the annual GDP of the United States. How much of that can be burned without launching the world into uncontrollable global warming? The best available estimates cited by Klein indicate that 80% of fossil fuel reserves – worth roughly \$20 trillion – must be left in the ground if the currently accepted goal of limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius is to be achieved.

Alternative sources of energy are available – that's not the problem. The "loss" of these fossil fuel resources will make life better, not worse – that's not the problem either.

The problem, Klein says, is that "we need to keep large, extremely profitable pools of carbon in the ground – resources that the fossil fuel companies are fully intending to extract." The \$20 trillion in unusable fossil fuel reserves is written into corporate balance sheets as "assets" and sustains their share value. Oil company executives defend not the public but their shareholders' wealth – which means defending their 'right' to extract without limit.

To this end, corporations mobilize their immense wealth and social influence to block any move to reduce the burning of their product – fossil fuels. Under their influence, when governments act at all, it is to encourage use of renewable energy rather than to restrain the rise of carbon emissions. The oil industry and its many corporate allies have maintained a blockade against measures to rein in rising emissions for 25 years and are in no mood to change course.

A troubling imperative

Averting climate disaster, Klein tells us, "will mean forcing some of the most profitable companies on the planet to forfeit trillions of dollars of future earnings by leaving the vast majority of proven fossil fuel reserves in the ground. It will also require coming up with trillions more to pay for zero-carbon, disaster-ready societal transformations." And these radical measures must be taken "democratically and without a bloodbath." This means we must oppose unfettered capitalism – the profit-based economic and social system that wages war on our climate.

This requirement poses a question that Klein finds troubling. When has there ever been a transformation that intruded on capitalist property to such an extent – moreover, a change "demanded from below, by regular people, when leaders have wholly abdicated their responsibilities"? In the West, she says, the transformative social movements have been for human rights – for blacks, women, gays, she says. "But the legal and cultural battles were always more successful than the economic ones."

As a precedent, she points to the movement in the nineteenth century to abolish slavery, particularly

as it developed in the United States. The weight of slave capital in the U.S. economy then was comparable to the weight of stranded fossil fuel investment today. For many decades the slave-owners maintained full control over the U.S. state. But ultimately a mass movement broke that control and abolished slave property forever. And this was done democratically, although only at the cost of a protracted civil war.

Klein's analogy has merit. However, it is also worth considering the precedent of socialist revolutions, even if they did not occur "in the West." One such revolution took place only 90 miles from the U.S., in Cuba. In the 1990s, Cuba carried out the world's most successful reduction of fossil fuel dependency. Despite a damaging U.S. blockade, the Cuban revolution continues to display creative vigor, most recently in the country's role as world leader in on-the-ground response to the Ebola virus epidemic.

The experience of twentieth century socialist revolutions, while troubled, is surely relevant to what we must now accomplish in the face of a systemic crisis of capitalism triggered by climate change. It is hard to see how the fossil fuel stranglehold can be broken without popular ownership and control over dominant industries. This case is made in three books on ecology and socialism that I've listed below.

Mass social movements

Klein's book has a single overriding strength: a comprehensive analysis – much broader than can be indicated here – that demonstrates that a movement to overcome the climate challenge must confront the prevailing economic and political system, and for that it must be massive, broad, and militant. A substantial and inspiring part of her book is devoted to first-hand accounts of what she calls "Blockadia" – grassroots movements on every continent that are directly challenging the fossil fuel industry's destructive projects.

A movement on the climate issue alone cannot win, she says. Climate activism must link up with "the unfinished business of the most powerful liberation movements of the past two centuries, from civil rights to feminism to Indigenous sovereignty." "Climate change can be the force – the grand push – that will bring together all of these still living movements."

Calls for such a fusion are increasingly frequent. The liberation movements Klein mentions – and labor, too – were in evidence at the great People's Climate March of 400,000 in New York on September 21 and in the surrounding conferences, as well as in parallel actions in Canada and around the globe. Naomi Klein's book is an inspiring contribution to this movement, which is increasingly becoming identified with the goals of climate justice and system change.

"Only mass social movements can save us now," Klein concludes. "If that happens, well, it changes everything."

John Riddell

Related reading

Books

Umair Muhammad. *Confronting Injustice: Social Activism in the Age of Individualism*, Toronto: 2014.

Chris Williams. *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis*. Haymarket Books, 2010.

Ian Angus. *The Global Fight for Climate Justice: Anticapitalist Responses to Global Warming and Environmental Destruction*. Fernwood Publishing, 2010.

Articles

Naomi Klein: "Climate change, unions, and a united left agenda"

<http://climateandcapitalism.com/2013/09/04/naomi-klein-climate-change-unions-united-left-agenda/>

Richard Fidler. "How Bolivia is leading the global fight against climate disaster"

<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/10/06/how-bolivia-is-leading-the-global-fight-against-climate-disaster/>

John Riddell. "Responding to capitalist global disaster: 1914 and today"

ESSF (article 32708). [The Second International and the First World War - Responding to capitalist global disaster: 1914 and today](#)

Umair Muhammad. "[Canada, oil and Enbridge - Lessons from Line 9 sit-ins: from direct action to organization](#)"

ESSF (article 32669)

Ian Angus. "How to make an ecosocialist revolution"

<http://climateandcapitalism.com/2011/10/07/how-to-make-an-ecosocialist-revolution/>

P.S.

* First published in "Climate and Capitalism.":

<http://climateandcapitalism.com/2014/10/19/naomi-klein-climate-change-mass-social-movements-can-save-us/>

<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/10/20/naomi-klein-only-mass-social-movements-can-save-us/>