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Global Elites Can't Beat Climate Change – We Need a Mass Movement

By

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At COP26, global elites are delivering sermons about fixing a system built in their interests – but the only way to avoid climate disaster is to build a movement that stops their profiteering from killing the planet.

Old or young, northern or southern, working class or not, polling now shows significant 'eco-anxiety' across the entire population of the UK. Recent years have made it clear, for the first time, that decisive action in response to the climate disaster would be popular—so much so that even the Tories have had to feign green credentials, even if their policy positions may amount to little.

At COP26, we are being told that the answer to this problem is to trust 'market-based solutions.' The conference has even given Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos a platform to talk about what his vanity space travel expeditions taught him about climate change. Clearly, for those of us interested in preventing this crisis, few answers will be found in Glasgow.

The real fight against climate change will come from below, grassroots organising that forces change to the polluting system which benefits the world's most powerful interests. But here we have a problem: whether it is Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain, or Green New Deal Rising, climate movements are using a mobilisation strategy which aims to maximise disruption which then increases media coverage and thus public awareness of the issues.

This is a strategy for a problem we are not facing. The problem that exists, the barrier to change, is not a lack of knowledge or concern on the population's part, but a deficit of power. The Left's strategy must reflect this, or we risk frenetic campaigning activity that ultimately changes little.

Media Coverage Won't Save Us

The repertoire of environmental direct action that includes blocking roads and bridges and disrupting business can be thought of as achieving two things. The first is increasing exposure through media coverage, which should convert more people to act for your cause. The second is a symbolic form of power—symbolic because each act of disruptive direct action can be without trouble overcome by the state, through selective arrests, injunctions, or police simply outnumbering protesters.

The idea of exposure as a strategy is that this will lead to an ever-growing number of people taking action until there is majority support for something to change. This is a model of political change built upon the belief that there is a deficit of knowledge: that if people were only informed, then change would happen. Such a belief in the primacy of spreading awareness means that the power a blockade holds for a few hours being little more than symbolic is no issue, since the crux of the strategy is the dissemination of knowledge, not the distribution of power.

The reality is that people are informed. There is a clear majority of people throughout society who are concerned about climate change and want action taken on it—so it follows that instead of a deficit of knowledge, the problem is a deficit of power.

The story of the climate crisis is a story of power. Companies and individuals pollute, destroy and exploit the world and its marginalised populations, knowing the disastrous effects. They do it because it makes them filthy rich, and it is the logic on which the global economy operates.

If we want real change we cannot locate the climate crisis as an exceptional event outside of politics. We cannot afford to simply be given scraps of carbon credits here and heat pump grants there. If we cannot generate a majority for action, and so meaningful power, then the cause is lost.

This majority for action means our story of the climate crisis must weave in other stories, too. That the changes we need to save the planet are also changes that can give dignity to workers.

The logic that dictates deforestation in Brazil is the same logic that leaves children below the poverty line in Britain. It is a logic of sublimating human dignity, and even survival, for profit. Shouting ever louder with more bombastic media spectacles will not be what shifts mass support into mass action. For that, we need deep organising.

Why Deep Organising?

When something is urgent there is an impulse to take what appears to be the most intense and radical action that can be found: to meet a crisis situation with an action on par with the emergency we face. In some instances this is fantastic, such as the prevention of an attempted detainment by immigration officers in Glasgow. The most radical action was the best action.

This, though, was an immediate problem that was overcome in hours. Such radical fervour cannot alone sustain a goal that requires years to come to fruition. For such long-term work, we need a movement that makes people feel they have power in all spheres of their life—not only when they are blocking a road.

Trade unions at their best are a good example of what the climate movement needs to do. When faced with something urgent, with an immediately winnable solution, they can bring to bear any and all pressure and resources at their disposal—such as the crisis leverage approach championed by Sharon Graham in Unite, using exceptional measures in exceptional and time-limited circumstances.

The analogy for the climate movement would be an attempt to open a new coal mine or organising pressure on a specific parliamentary vote. Using anything and everything you can to achieve your goal is strategically the right call.

We do, though, have to return to the day-to-day: the unassuming and unspectacular politics of everyday life. It is here where the real lesson in organising comes through.

Organising means you need a movement that radicalises, not a movement for radicals. For me, as a union rep, it has often meant hours of work that produce little immediate result, but that over time shift the dynamics of a workplace.

It is a product of one-on-one conversations, where you don't speak primarily as an activist or a union rep. You speak as a colleague, a fellow worker who has the same material interests.

It is a process that involves difficult conversations taking place over months. If you encounter a colleague hostile to the union, you don't have the luxury of ignoring them: you have to win them over bit by bit. You start small and build. You trust the workers and get them invested in the idea of being agents of change. You instigate and negotiate for small changes that at each step convince the workers that things can be different.

There is an instinctive trust that builds by knowing that you are all in the same boat. This is not change that can be brought about by seeing press coverage or reading an article. It is change by mass participation, where workers who were once passive become active. In short they become leaders—leaders not separated from their communities, but always reflective of them.

Extinction Rebellion shut down the Murdoch printing press that distributes climate denialism to every corner shop for a day or two; but serious and deep organising of delivery workers could have shut it down for weeks. The state can clear any blocked road if push comes to shove, as it can overcome a commendable but exceptional few who consent to be arrested for the cause.

However, it has a far harder time overcoming action that is a product of strong solidarity of an existing community, be they workers demanding a

firm undertake a green transition, tenants rent striking for proper environmental retrofitting, or any of the other multitude of opportunities for mass action based on strong social ties that metamorphose into unshakeable political solidarity.

Until the climate movement builds power instead of demanding concessions we cannot dismantle the system that destroys the planet and people every day.

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