

# Environmentalism as if Winning Mattered: A Civil Society Strategy



By Steve D'Arcy

A long-range strategy for fighting - and winning - the struggle to defend the planet and its people from corporate greed and to replace ecocidal capitalism with an environmentally just and sustainable post-capitalist economic democracy.

Includes as an appendix:  
**The Belém Ecosocialist Declaration (2009)**

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# **Environmentalism as if Winning Mattered**

## **A Civil Society Strategy**

**By Steve D'Arcy**

Many people doubt that the environmental movement can actually defeat its adversaries and achieve its key aims. After all, it seems clear that winning would mean introducing sweeping social change and a new kind of sustainable and socially just economy. But the forces arrayed against this kind of change - including corporations, governments, and many affluent consumers hoping to boost their consumption levels in the years ahead - seem to represent too powerful a force to be overcome by a relatively small and seemingly powerless group of environmental activists.

These doubts about the capacity of environmentalists to win are confined neither to the movement's self-serving and greed-motivated adversaries nor to the many indifferent bystanders who cast an equally skeptical eye on all attempts to make the world a better place. As it happens, many environmental activists themselves are no less convinced that failure is all but inevitable.

When this sort of pessimism overtakes environmentalists, they tend to adopt one of several familiar responses. First, there is the response of those who retreat from the movement altogether in favor of "lifestyle" environmentalism, replacing their former activism with "conscious" shopping. Second, there are those who reject activism as naïve compared to their own approach of apocalyptic "survivalism" which leads them to prepare for the day when civilization collapses, such as by

stockpiling food or learning how to hunt and gather. A third group responds to the apparently bleak outlook for environmental activism not by leaving the movement, but by remaining active while seeking to cultivate friends in high places, linking arms with Big Business or the capitalist state in a mode of "mainstream" environmentalism that tries to promote "environmentally friendly" capitalism and "socially responsible" corporations. A fourth group also remains active, but replaces the aim of winning with the more readily attainable aim of making a moral statement, by serving as a "moral witness" or by "speaking truth to power."

There is nothing to be gained by adopting a judgmental or holier-than-thou attitude toward people who adopt such responses. Why condemn such choices, which are all more or less understandable adaptations to the admittedly distressing predicament of contemporary environmentalism?

Nevertheless, we do need to see these stances for what they undoubtedly are: failures (in some cases) or refusals (in others) to develop *a strategy for winning*. Yet a strategy for winning is precisely what we need. The scale of the general environmental crisis is well known, and needs no special emphasis here: we are only too well-informed about the potentially catastrophic impact of plutogenic (caused-by-the-rich) climate change, the degradation of air quality, the erosion and poisoning of soil, the disappearance of forests and spreading of deserts, the despoliation of both fresh water sources and oceans, the historically unprecedented rates of species extinction, and so on. If nothing is done about any of this, it is not because there is any uncertainty about the gravity of these threats (notwithstanding cynical attempts by Big Business to fund "denial" research from "free market think tanks" to muddy the waters of public discussion).

Something *must* be done, clearly. And most people certainly *want* more to be done. Globally, according to a survey of world opinion in July 2009, the great majority of people regard their own governments as failing to take climate change (for

example) as seriously as they should. According to Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org (which conducted the poll), "most people around the world appear to be impatient that their government is not doing enough to address the problem of climate change." Indeed, "on average across all nations polled, 60 percent want climate change to get a higher priority, 12 percent want a lower priority." Evidently, it is not a matter of needing to "change attitudes" or "educate the public." If governments and corporations were reasonably responsive to public opinion, the prospects for implementing real change would be much more favorable for our side than they actually are at present.

The widespread pessimism about the movement's prospects for success is impossible to explain without relating it to a widely understood insight registered in another recent opinion poll. According to a 2009 Harris Poll, 85% of Americans believe that "Big companies" have "too much power and influence in Washington." The same percentage of Americans believe that "political action committees that give money to political candidates" also have too much power and influence. Conversely, a full 76% of Americans believe that "public opinion" has "*too little* power and influence in Washington." Americans, it seems, understand their political process rather better than many people give them credit for.

It should be clear, therefore, that we need a strategy for winning, and we need to develop it sooner rather than later. The approach that I pursue in this article will be to identify *strategic objectives* for weakening and ultimately defeating the adversaries that stand in the way of doing what science, morality, and common sense dictate *must* be done: transforming our destructive, unjust and unsustainable social order into a democratic, egalitarian and sustainable one.

## A CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY

The strategy that I propose here is a *civil society strategy*. We need to distinguish, however, between two ways of thinking about *civil society* in general, and the role that civil society can play in environmental activism in particular.

In recent democratic theory, the term "civil society" generally refers to the sphere or domain of *voluntary association*, in which *citizens organize themselves collectively*, yet in a manner that is independent of both the economy on the one hand and the state on the other. Thus, civil society fits into a fourfold picture of society, which distinguishes between (1) the *personal sphere* of intimate relations between friends, family, and neighbors; (2) the *economic sphere* of relations between employer and employee, corporations and customers, and so on; (3) the *state sphere* of relations between voters and public officials, encompassing state agencies, political parties that aspire to govern, the military and police, etc.; and (4) the *civil society sphere* of voluntary associations, including churches and other 'worship' communities, trade unions, public advocacy groups, popular mobilization organizations, community service projects, group affiliation organizations (like cultural clubs, bowling leagues, animal welfare associations), and so on.

Unfortunately, in the context of discussions about environmentalism, there is a tendency, among activists as well as academics, to equate civil society with *Non-Governmental Organizations* (NGOs), understood as formal organizations run by a paid staff, perhaps with a dues-paying but passive membership or a passive donor-base in the general public, such as the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund, Environmental Defense Fund, and so on. But the first thing we need to do in order to develop a plausible civil society strategy for the environmental movement is to make a distinction between different sorts of civil society associations.

Besides formal NGOs with passive memberships (for which I will reserve the label "NGOs"), there are three other sorts of civil society associations that we need to take into account:

1. **Social Movement Organizations (SMOs):** As I use this term, these are *participatory* activist organizations (formal or informal), in which members/participants actively organize themselves, at the grassroots level, to engage in popular mobilization or public advocacy, as part of a social movement, such as the environmental movement, the disability rights movement, the feminist movement, or anti-racist movements.
2. **Class Conflict Organizations (CCOs):** The main example is trade unions. It is crucial to add, however, that rank-and-file caucuses *within* unions are also CCOs. But so are workers' centres, living wage campaigns, and other working-class struggle organizations, including many socialist and anarchist organizations (as long as they are not, or not mainly, oriented to campaigning in elections).
3. **Grassroots-Democratic Organizations (GDOs):** Here a key example is co-operatives (housing, retail, financial, and worker co-ops). But in some contexts, such as contemporary Venezuela, there are other types of GDOs, such as community councils. In several cities in Brazil, in Kerala, India, and other places, participatory budgeting popular assemblies are probably best described as GDOs, although in these cases there is a degree of integration with the state that makes them hard to classify as entirely within the realm of civil society. (Arguably, they represent a kind of *incursion* by civil society into a domain previously monopolized by state institutions. A similar point could be made about co-operatives vis-à-vis the market economy.)

From a political-strategic point of view, the difference between NGOs on the one hand and SMOs, CCOs, and GDOs on the other, is crucial. When I speak here of a *civil society strategy*, I am *not* talking about NGOs, but rather about SMOs, CCOs and GDOs. This is because, although I favor a non-statist strategy

that rejects any and all attempts to find allies in the corporate class, I also reject the model of organizing that typifies (according to the way I use the term in this article) NGOs: the top-down model of an environmentalism-from-above, in which ordinary working people figure as donors or, at best, letter-writers, rather than active participants in a process of grassroots popular mobilization and self-organization.

By "civil society strategy," then, I mean an approach to environmental movement-building that satisfies two criteria. First, it focuses on organizing for change within civil society, as opposed to the personal sphere (which lifestyle environmentalists and eco-survivalists prioritize), the economic sphere (which "green consumer," "natural-capitalism" and "corporate social responsibility" advocates prioritize); or the state sphere (which mainstream lobbying NGOs and most Green Parties and Social-Democratic Parties tend to prioritize). Second, within civil society it highlights, not top-down NGOs, but grassroots SMOs, CCOs, and GDOs as the key organizational vehicles for mounting a challenge to ecocidal capitalism and for constructing anticipatory post-capitalist alternatives that model sustainability and both social and environmental justice.

## TWO PHASES

By definition, a strategy for winning will sketch out a path - a "line of march," as they say - for getting us from where we now stand to where we need to be, if we are to win our struggle against our adversaries.

Because "where we need to be," in this case, is in a *post-capitalist, democratic, sustainable, and socially just economy* (see Hahnel, "Protecting the Environment in a Participatory Economy" <<http://www.greens.org/s-r/34/34-18.html>>), the path along which we need to move will involve breaking the resistance of an adversary that we know will remain, to the bitter end, implacably opposed to everything we are trying to accomplish: the giant corporations that dominate our economy

as well as our political process. We have, therefore, a formidable opponent, with enormous resources of every sort, determined to fight against our efforts every step of the way. By comparison, we environmentalists are at the present time alarmingly weak and ill-prepared for the task of winning this fight (this in spite of the vast monetary resources at the disposal of the big NGOs that monopolize the public face of the movement but have no intention of mobilizing for a fight against Big Business).

How should we proceed? I propose that our movement should think about a strategy for winning as falling into two *phases*. The first phase - which I call the *resistance phase* - will be devoted to weakening our adversary and strengthening our own side. In the resistance phase, we will be able to fight effectively, to win political 'battles' in many cases, and always to lay the foundation for a future decisive victory. But we will not yet be ready to actually *win*. The second phase - which I call the *transition phase* - will only begin once we have successfully carried out the strategic objectives of the resistance phase, that is, after we have weakened the corporate class and its political representatives and strengthened our own forces to the point where a direct challenge to the hegemony and power of corporations will stand a realistic chance of succeeding. In the transition phase, we will not just be fighting a defensive struggle to resist the environmental havoc wreaked by corporate greed and capitalist maldevelopment; we will be launching a struggle to force - by mobilizing the social power of grassroots self-organization - a transition from capitalism to a sustainable, environmentally just post-capitalist economic democracy.

From these considerations it follows that a civil society strategy for the environmental movement will take the form of *two sets of strategic objectives*: first, *resistance objectives* which, when carried out, will so weaken the ecocidal ruling class as to make a direct grassroots challenge to its power possible; and second, *transition objectives* which, when carried out, will launch us on the path toward a building a new society.

## THE RESISTANCE PHASE

The strategic objectives of the resistance phase are each to be pursued simultaneously. There are four of them:

1. To build **cost-raising protest movements** against all forms of environmental destruction, framing these struggles whenever possible as struggles for *environmental justice* and/or for prioritizing *the public interest over corporate profits*;
2. To construct a **labour/community/environmental anti-corporate alliance** *at the grassroots level*;
3. To create and support anticipatory **community-based alternatives** to capitalist production that model sustainability and environmental justice;
4. To (re-)establish **vital currents of ecologically oriented anti-capitalist radicalism** (eco-socialism, social ecology, participatory economics, etc.).

I will say a few things about each of these objectives in turn.

### *Cost-raising Environmental Justice Protest Movements*

The first resistance-phase strategic objective is to build cost-raising protest movements against all forms of environmental destruction, framing these struggles whenever possible as struggles for environmental justice and/or for prioritizing the public interest over corporate profits. To explain this objective, I need to explain, first, the idea of a cost-raising movement, and second, the rationale for a focus on justice and people-over-profits.

A key assumption upon which the civil society strategy is based is that governments and corporations are *not* responsive to moral principles, to arguments about the public interest or what is best "for our grandchildren," or to appeals to reasonableness and common sense. Instead, governments and corporations are *interest-motivated* institutions. That is to say, they act almost entirely based on cost/benefit analysis, factoring in not the

public interest but the interests of the elites who rule these institutions. This insight has to inform how we "do activism."

If corporations and their political representatives in the capitalist state are interest-motivated, and base their behavior on cost/benefit calculations, then we can explain their unwillingness to allow constraints on their environmentally destructive policies and practices as a side-effect of the fact that they *benefit from* their freedom to destroy the planet, and that it would be *costly* to them if they were no longer allowed to exploit and despoil the Earth.

If that analysis is basically correct, which few can seriously doubt, then something should follow about the kind of strategy we ought to adopt in trying (in the short term) to challenge their behavior and defend the planet and its occupants from the ecocidal effects of capitalist production and accumulation: *if we want them to stop, we have to change the balance of costs versus benefits, until destroying the Earth is more costly than refraining from doing so.*

That is the basic idea of a cost-raising movement: we inflict penalties on the rich in response to plutogenic environmental injustice and destruction, in order to change the cost/benefit calculations of elites, until they change their behavior (while recognizing that there are limits to how successful this effort can be as long as the economy remains profit-driven and undemocratic).

How can we raise the costs of environmental destruction? One way is to impose monetary penalties. If we know anything, we know that capitalist elites are responsive to monetary incentives. This is well understood by today's environmentalists, even when their politics are in other respects quite weak (e.g., PETA). It is the premise behind boycotting tactics, which are widespread, and also eco-sabotage, which is less widely practiced but quite high-profile and also well understood.

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A less obvious, but ultimately more effective form of cost-raising occurs when a movement threatens, not just particular monetary losses, but the reproduction of the privileged social position of Big Business itself. Ideally, this should be our aim in building an environmental protest movement.

If the environmental movement can convince corporations that popular opposition to the environmental destructiveness of Big Business is driving large numbers of workers, students, poor and unemployed people to begin to question, not just the particular actions of individual companies, but the dominance of corporate power itself, then the movement will have a real capacity to intimidate corporations into at least limited forms of compliance with the imperatives of sustainability and environmental justice.

Because the corporate elite will never change its behavior by the force of rational arguments, our capacity as activists to influence their decision-making is always indirect: by creating a level of dissent, both wide enough (encompassing masses of people) and deep enough (opposing not just a particular policy, but the whole corporate agenda and the corporate power structure that imposes that agenda), that the corporate elite has grounds to worry that its position of unquestioned privilege and societal 'hegemony' or leadership is being placed in jeopardy by the environmentally destructive behavior that is fuelling this dissent.

So, a cost-raising protest movement would aim, *first*, to mobilize and politicize masses of workers and students, poor and unemployed people, women and communities of colour, to speak out and protest against environmental injustice. *Second*, it would seek to educate and ultimately radicalize those politicizing people by demonstrating to them that the destruction of the Earth is being propelled by the greed of corporations and the servility of the state in relation to those corporate interests. And, *third*, as the movement grows and more people begin to turn against the corporate agenda and develop a willingness to oppose it and demand that governments refuse to serve it, the

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movement would aim to force some corporations and governments to make significant concessions to the movement, out of elite fears that their privileges are threatened by the growing and deepening opposition to corporate power being fuelled by a popular backlash against environmental injustice and destruction.

But why the focus on "environmental justice" and "prioritizing people over corporate profits"? Why not focus on fostering a new "deep ecological" consciousness or a post-productivist "paradigm shift," etc.?

There are multiple reasons, from an intellectual point of view. But, from a strategic point of view (which is the crucial one here), it needs to be underlined that a focus on environmental injustice and people-over-profits is a necessary part of a larger emphasis, which is built into the civil society strategy, on *popular mobilization* and the building of an anti-corporate alliance. Talk of a movement that would be "neither left nor right," that would be based on some kind of expanded ethical consciousness or a "neo-primitivist" repudiation of modernity, or any of the multitude of "consciousness-raising" forms of environmentalism, *rather than a clear-eyed focus on defeating Big Business as the key enemy of the environmental movement*, will only lead us down the road to defeat. We are seeking, on the contrary, a strategy for winning. And a focus on fomenting popular indignation against the corporate elite is crucial for any plausible strategy for winning.

Moreover, the environmental justice movement is founded on a moral as well as a strategic insight: morally, we ought to be clear that environmental destruction does disproportionately affect people who are subjected to socially organized disadvantage (such as Indigenous people, workers, the poor, racialized groups, women, most people in the global South); and strategically, we have good reason to use this injustice to help channel and mobilize popular anger in constructing an anti-corporate alliance between social justice movements, labour movements, and environmental movements.

*A Grassroots Labour/Community/Environmental Alliance*

The second resistance-phase strategic objective is to construct an anti-corporate labour/community/environmental alliance at the grassroots level. This is not so much a separate objective in relation to the first, but rather a way of thinking about the forces we need to unite in the course of building an effective environmental protest movement that is willing and able to confront corporate power.

As part of a civil society strategy, this objective has to be distinguished from a superficially similar strategy, sometimes called a "blue/green alliance" or "labor/environmental alliance" or a "turtles-and-teamsters" strategy, which is almost always understood to be (or at least practiced as) a top-down approach in which union presidents meet with NGO executive directors to plot a joint legislative lobbying agenda (see [bluegreenalliance.org](http://bluegreenalliance.org) and [apolloalliance.org](http://apolloalliance.org)). This extends all of the weaknesses of NGO-orchestrated spectator-activism into the workers' movement, and the civil society strategy entirely rejects this approach. True, unions are CCOs, not NGOs, in the sense I give to these terms. But *in their capacity as government lobbying groups*, which is the aspect of unions that are front-and-centre in most high-level "blue/green alliance" efforts, unions actually function much more like NGOs, notably in the sense that their members figure in these projects as passive dues-payers rather than as active participants. By contrast, the civil society strategy proposes to develop forms of grassroots self-organization, not to build alliances between various top-down organizations hoping to bolster their bargaining power when lobbying politicians. One consequence of this is that I don't mean to single out *unions* as such, but rather working-class organizations, including groups organizing living wage campaigns, campaigns against sexual harassment of women in the workplace, solidarity campaigns with workers other parts of the world, and so on. Unions are important in all of this, of course, but so are other expressions of working-class self-organization.

Note also that I am talking about a labour/*community*/environmental alliance, not just a labour/environmental alliance. The reason is simple: the labour movement and the environmental movement need each other, to maximize their anti-corporate mobilizing capacity, but both of those movements *also* need to align themselves with grassroots efforts in the feminist movement and the anti-racist movement, with anti-poverty movements and with Indigenous movements. In the absence of this *broader community* orientation, the labour and environmental movements will be undermined internally, because they will not be challenged to respond effectively to the grievances of many exploited and oppressed people in the wider society, and they will be undermined externally, because their mobilizing capacity will be more limited.

Building a labour/community/environmental alliance against Big Business will be difficult, even though important work on this front has already been done over a period of decades. We are not starting from scratch by any means, but neither can we rest content with things as they stand today. In building on the work of previous generations, we need to cling to the basic principle of all solidarity-building: to remember that *an injury to one is an injury to all*. This means that the grievances and aspirations of all groups in this alliance - women, Indigenous peoples, poor people, people of colour, workers, environmentalists, and so on - need to be taken seriously and given prominence and weight in the decisions and actions of *all* the other groups. For environmentalists, this means cultivating a *feminist* environmentalism, a *class-struggle* environmentalism, a *poor-people's* environmentalism, an *anti-imperialist* environmentalism, and so on. For this reason, as for others, the framework of *environmental justice* is crucial for building our movement into an effective anti-corporate force.

One final point. The labour movement can be an unusually difficult ally for environmentalists (and, sometimes, vice versa), because unions tend to have a bias in favour of protecting present-day employment sources, even if those employment sources are unsustainable and violate principles of

environmental justice. Why bother working to strengthen such an alliance? The answer is clear: unions, and other working-class organizations, are especially strategically important for all anti-corporate social change movements because it is the working class that has, uniquely, the capacity to deal the most crushing blows to capitalist production: to shut down workplaces. In the absence of an effective and longstanding alliance between working-class organizations and environmental organizations, it is simply inconceivable that the environmental movement can win.

The demand for *free retraining* and "green-job" *employment guarantees* (in unionized jobs) for workers displaced by environmental progress must be front and centre in all the discussions and actions undertaken by environmentalists.

### *Sustainable Community-based Alternatives*

The third resistance-phase strategic objective is to create and support anticipatory community-based alternatives to capitalist production that model sustainability and environmental justice;

Protest, surely, is not enough. In part because of the discrediting of earlier Left social reform projects (the statist bureaucratic planning economies of countries like the USSR, the welfare-state bureaucratism of European social-democracy), it is crucial that the environmental movement give serious attention to pursuing a "build-it-now" strategy, constructing non-capitalist, sustainable production and distribution vehicles before the defeat of capitalism. In order to position our movement as offering a credible and viable alternative to capitalism, we need to draw people out of their immersion in and dependence on the capitalist mode of production and draw them into "counter-capitalist" alternatives that model sustainability and environmental justice.

It is worth recalling that, when the socialist Left was (arguably) at its strongest, in the years prior to World War I, it had been an entrenched, taken-for-granted feature of socialist strategy to

build a strong co-operative movement, with close ties to both unions and socialist organizations. In general, and with many important exceptions, neither the socialist Left nor the environmental movement has given enough attention to building this kind of counter-economy in recent decades. Nevertheless, the "social" or "solidarity" economy of co-operatives and other non-profit, grassroots, egalitarian, and non-statist forms of community-based economic democracy is in many ways thriving. It consists of an array of counter-capitalist institutions such as food retail co-ops, community gardening and urban farming co-operatives, local participatory budgeting processes, ecologically responsible worker co-ops, transnational grassroots fair trade arrangements, and experiments in participatory economics. And it already has broad appeal and deep roots in many communities in most countries. Building this sector, and encouraging it to evolve in the direction of a class-struggle, environmental justice orientation, must be made central to the struggle for a sustainable post-capitalist social order.

### *Vital Currents of Ecological Anti-Capitalism*

The fourth and final resistance-phase strategic objective singled out by the civil society strategy is to establish, or re-establish, vital currents of *ecologically oriented anti-capitalist radicalism*.

It is no secret that anti-capitalist radicalism in North America has been in decline since the 1970s. But it should be equally clear that a strategy for winning for the environmental movement will need to be able to draw on a strong anti-capitalist Left as a source of analysis, strategy, and vision. Ultimately, to take up the task of winning, environmentalists will have to merge with anti-capitalists. This merger will require a double transformation: the anti-capitalist Left will have to move toward an ecologically informed critique of capitalism, and environmentalists will have to move toward an anti-capitalist interpretation of ecology.

This double shift has been underway for decades. Social ecology, which emerged from the anarchist Left, was one pioneering political current promoting this convergence. More recently, eco-socialism and ecological democracy have emerged from the Marxist Left to give further impetus to this process. Meanwhile, an anti-corporate sensibility has taken firm root in much of the environmental movement, especially among environmental justice activists, even if the grotesque alliances with Big Business undertaken by some high-profile, well-funded establishment NGOs have obscured the strong and growing rift between environmentalists and bosses that exists at the grassroots level.

Many will be tempted, in a predictable way, to think of fostering currents of anti-capitalist radicalism as a task best pursued in small membership organizations or 'sects' that promote the Correct Program, as interpreted by the group's founders. A civil society approach proceeds differently, by means of a proliferation of "political centres" (to use Hal Draper's term<sup>1</sup>). Political centres are not membership organizations but publishing and propagation projects that cultivate the emergence and consolidation of identifiable political currents (social ecology, eco-socialism, parecon/parsoc, etc.), while allowing these currents to maintain ongoing dialogue with a wide array of activists, not just actual or potential joiners of a membership organization. Some examples of political centres would be: ZNet/Z Magazine, Monthly Review, the Eco-socialist International Network, the Institute for Social Ecology, and so on. Creating political centres instead of programmatically uniform membership organizations sets up a healthier dynamic and draws the Left away from zero-sum competition for members and toward a healthy ongoing debate among comrades who see things differently and want to make their case to each other without reifying differences into organizational boundaries that divide activists unnecessarily.

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Draper, "Toward a New Beginning, on Another Road: The Alternative to the Micro-sect." <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1971/alt/alt.htm>>

Part of rebuilding a strong anti-capitalist Left, which can play a key role in bolstering and radicalizing the environmental movement, is working to create "two, three, many" political centres or currents of ecologically informed anti-capitalist radicalism, each of which can attempt to make a real contribution to moving our struggles forward, but none of which can credibly claim to monopolize insight or to be the voice of the movement.

## THE TRANSITION PHASE

Once the strategic objectives of the resistance phase are carried out, the situation of the environmental movement will be radically transformed. Instead of being a relatively weak and badly positioned movement, despairing at its incapacity to defeat a formidable adversary, it will find itself in a position of relative strength, backed by (1) powerful environmental-justice protest movements, (2) a strong anti-corporate alliance between working class organizations and environmental SMOs, (3) an array of healthy and well-functioning counter-capitalist alternative economic institutions comprising an egalitarian, sustainable and democratic prefiguration of a post-capitalist future, and (4) a resurgence of anti-capitalist radical currents, which would now be informed by an ecological awareness largely missing from the radical politics of the past.

The once-mighty ruling class, meanwhile, would be everywhere on the defensive: fighting off the demands of mass protests; its waning hegemony challenged by a powerful anti-corporate alliance; discredited by the visibility of viable alternatives to profit-motivated production; and locked in an ideological struggle against the growing influence of radical anti-capitalist environmental vision and analysis.

From such a position of strength, the environmental movement could finally take up directly the task of imposing defeat on its adversary. Specifying strategic objectives for a transition struggle is, necessarily, more speculative in a time like the present, when transition tasks are not on our agenda. But,

reflecting on struggles taking place in countries like Venezuela, and factoring in what can be learnt from a study of upsurges of mass radical action in earlier decades, it is possible to sketch a few key objectives that can give content to the idea of a "transition phase" of the struggle to defeat capitalism and launch the project of constructing a just and sustainable post-capitalist economic democracy

Somewhat schematically, I would propose that we think of the *transition phase* as having four strategic objectives to carry out:

1. To organize anti-capitalist environmentalists into a **common front** of radical community organizations (SMOs, CCOs, GDOs), capable of tactical concentration for united action;
2. To establish **the hegemony of the anti-capitalist common front** within the mass environmental movement, so that it exercises a consensual, acknowledged leadership role in pointing the way forward for the broader movement;
3. To gain for the common front and its allies a degree of community-based "social" power, resting on the capacity to deploy general strikes, mass protest, and mass civil disobedience campaigns, on such a scale that the community-based opposition constitutes **a community-based counter-power** that can effectively challenge the economic power of corporations and the coercive power of the state;
4. To secure **the transfer of ever more extensive governance functions to community-based self-organization** (SMOs, CCOs, GDOs in civil society), ultimately displacing -- rapidly whenever possible, gradually whenever necessary -- both "private" and "state" sector institutions from their role in running the economy, the healthcare and education systems, providing social services, etc.

The first three of these transition-phase strategic objectives could be carried out simultaneously, and over a period of years. The fourth transition objective could be *pursued* simultaneously

with the others, but only *completed* at the culmination of the whole strategic project, by actually breaking once and for all the resistance of Big Business, and embarking on the construction of a sustainable, socially just post-capitalist social order, based on community organizations ("councils") in workplaces and neighborhoods.

I will say a little bit about each of these transition objectives.

### *A Common Front*

The first transition-phase strategic objective of the civil society strategy is to organize anti-capitalist environmentalists into a *common front* of radical community organizations (SMOs, CCOs, GDOs), capable of tactical concentration or unity in action.

Note two points about this proposal. First, it is not a political party. It is, above all, not a party aiming to win state power, whether by means of elections or in some other way. On the contrary, it is an organized formal alliance of multiple grassroots civil society organizations, with a mass constituency rooted in neighborhoods, communities, and workplaces. Second, however, note that the common front proposed here *is* something that can do some of the things that party-building advocates rightly regard as strategically necessary for defeating Big Business. It can coordinate tactical concentration: united action by the anti-capitalist opposition to challenge corporations and the state, and ultimately attempt to defeat them once and for all. And it can serve as a an organized vehicle for the radical, activist wing of the wider movement to make its case to the general public for militant and decisive struggle against Big Business and the capitalist state.

The precise form to be taken by a common front of this kind will have to be worked out by activists attempting to actually build it, in the context of a strong mass movement with influential ecological anti-capitalist currents (conditions that do not now exist in North America). The only point upon which a civil

society strategy insists is that it be an organization for popular mobilization, public advocacy and other forms of grassroots self-activity, as distinct from a political party attempting to win elections or install itself atop the capitalist state.

### *Anti-capitalist Hegemony*

The third transition-stage strategic objective of the civil society strategy is to establish the hegemony, or acknowledged leadership role, of the anti-capitalist common front, within the mass environmental movement.

As always, the reason for adopting a strategic objective is that it seems like a necessary element of a strategy for winning. If the environmental movement is to be successful, then it will have to come to pass, eventually, and as soon as possible, that the radical, anti-capitalist wing of the movement, which promotes a real challenge to the rule of Big Business, and which is committed to fighting for sweeping social change, will find itself increasingly acknowledged by the mass base of the movement as the force that has the right approach to pushing the movement forward. Today, of course, this is far from being the case. But it would be fruitless to try to conceive of a strategy for winning against Big Business that doesn't envision a situation - probably a time of profound social crisis - in which the anti-capitalist wing of the movement emerges as the acknowledged leadership of the struggle.

Of course, here we need to ward off possible misunderstanding. By saying that the anti-capitalist wing of the movement, as organized into the common front of radical SMOs, CCOs, and GDOs, has to emerge as the acknowledged leadership of the broader movement, I do not mean that it should exercise *authority* over the movement or make decisions on its behalf. I mean that it must be able to count on broad mass support from the wider movement, so that if the common front calls for a general strike, workers actually go out, and if it calls for mass civil disobedience, then masses of people take up the call. This is not a matter of authority; it is a matter of the most advanced

and militant sector of the movement forging a consensus within the wider movement in support of a certain line of march, which masses of people 'buy into' as representing the most compelling proposal for how to move the struggle forward during a time of crisis.

### *A Community-based Counter-power*

The third transition-phase strategic objective of the civil society strategy is to gain for the common front and its allies a degree of community-based "social" power, resting on the capacity to deploy general strikes, mass protest, and mass civil disobedience campaigns, on a scale that can effectively challenge the economic power of corporations and the coercive power of the state.

We know where corporations get their power - they control the means of production; and we know where the capitalist state gets its power - it has a monopoly of legal coercive force; but we need to be equally clear where the environmental movement gets *its* power. Environmentalism's strength, and therefore its capacity to win, depends crucially upon its capacity to exercise a kind of power that is neither economic nor political but *social*, that is, it is the community-based power of grassroots self-organization within civil society. In short, its power resides in the organizational capacities of social movement organizations, class conflict organizations, and grassroots democratic organizations.

A strategy for winning, therefore, must include a strategy for building up the social power of the movement to such a degree that it can actually *rival* the degree of power that corporations and their political underlings in the capitalist state can *jointly* muster. It is a tall order. But we know from the history of revolutionary movements that, under the right conditions, when an emboldened and militant mass movement confronts a weakened and ineffective ruling elite, the social power of mass movements *can* topple regimes and institute sweeping social change. That is just a plain fact of modern history. If all four of

the resistance-phase strategic objectives have been successfully secured, the environmental movement will be rather well-positioned to begin building up this kind of social power.

The way to do it, though, is not in the usual way that social power is built up, which is by building grassroots organizations that collectively address people's needs and advance their aims. Instead, building up the kind of power needed to challenge the ruling elites of capitalist society directly will require that the strongest weapons in the arsenal (so to speak) of civil society: general strikes, militant mass demonstrations, and mass campaigns of civil disobedience. These tactics, when supported not just by small and isolated groups (as is often so today), but by a broad and powerful mass movement that is unwilling to take 'No' for an answer, can generate vast concentrations of social power, certainly enough (when the circumstances are favorable) to rival the power of a compromised, weakened ruling class.

### *Transferring Public Authority to Community Organizations*

The fourth transition-phase strategic objective of the civil society strategy, and the one that more than any other gives content to the aim of "winning," is the objective of securing the transfer of ever more extensive governance functions (including running the economy, the healthcare and education systems, providing social services, etc.) from "private" and "state" sector institutions to the "social" sector of community-based self-organization (i.e., to civil society SMOs, CCOs, GDOs).

To *complete* this transfer would be, in and of itself, to have defeated capitalism (but not necessarily to have consolidated a coherent and well-functioning alternative, which presumably may take time). But there is no reason to delay this work until we reach the climax or the end-point of the struggle against the rule of Big Business. In principle, it can begin today. Clearly, though, in the transition phase of the movement, when the community-based Left is very strong and the ruling class is

weak, it will be an especially opportune time for civil society to try to wrench governance functions away from corporations and the state.

In each case, when a governance function is captured by grassroots self-organization and taken over by civil society, a key task will obviously be to reconfigure these functions (economic, administrative, technical, pedagogical, medical, etc.) in ways that are consistent with our core values and ultimate aims, namely, political and economic democracy, social and environmental justice, and ecological sustainability. This, of course, will be a continuation of work being done throughout the resistance phase (see resistance objective 3).

One question that arises in this connection is whether we should think of this transition - this transfer of governance functions from the hierarchical and authoritarian institutions of capitalism (corporations and the state) to the egalitarian and democratic institutions of a radicalized grassroots civil society - as taking place *gradually*, evolving over a period of many years, or *abruptly*, by means of relatively brief revolutionary process. Both positions have an element of plausibility to them. However, it is just common sense to acknowledge that those periods which witness sudden upsurges of civic engagement, in which popular participation in public affairs is both more widespread than usual and takes more insistent forms than usual, and which we call "*revolutions*," are golden opportunities to be seized upon to push the transition process as far as it can possibly go. In that sense, the civil society strategy is clearly a *revolutionary* strategy. But there is no reason to *wait* for such an upsurge before beginning to undertake the transition, nor is there any reason to *cease* struggling for more far-reaching change after a revolutionary upsurge has died down. This opportunity-driven approach to revolutionary transition - gradual transformation whenever necessary, rapid transformations whenever possible - seems to be the approach of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, which is as good a model as we have before us today (in spite of the well-known limitations of its approach to sustainability issues).

## CONCLUSION

The civil society strategy is designed to offer what many approaches to environmental activism stop short of proposing: a strategy for winning.

It is distinctive for two main reasons. First, it looks neither to the personal sphere, nor to the economic sphere, nor to the political sphere, but instead to the associational sphere of civil society as the key *locus* for building a powerful movement for challenging corporate power and constructing a sustainable and just alternative. Second, within civil society, it looks not to the high-profile and well-funded environmental NGOs as key agents for organizing collective action, but instead to the social movement organizations, class-conflict organizations and grassroots democratic organizations that serve as the primary vehicles for the self-organization of grassroots activism in the environmental movement and in other struggles for political and economic democracy and for social and environmental justice.

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## The Belém Ecosocialist Declaration (2009)

*The following Declaration was prepared by a committee elected for this purpose at the Paris Ecosocialist Conference of 2007 (Ian Angus, Joel Kovel, Michael Löwy), with the help of Danielle Follett. It was distributed at the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil, in January 2009. The Declaration was supported by more than 400 activists from 34 countries*

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*"The world is suffering from a fever due to climate change, and the disease is the capitalist development model."  
– Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, September 2007*

### *Humanity's Choice*

Humanity today faces a stark choice: ecosocialism or barbarism.

We need no more proof of the barbarity of capitalism, the parasitical system that exploits humanity and nature alike. Its sole motor is the imperative toward profit and thus the need for constant growth. It wastefully creates unnecessary products, squandering the environment's limited resources and returning to it only toxins and pollutants. Under capitalism, the only measure of success is how much more is sold every day, every week, every year - involving the creation of vast quantities of products that are directly harmful to both humans and nature, commodities that cannot be produced without spreading disease, destroying the forests that produce the oxygen we breathe, demolishing ecosystems, and treating our water, air and soil like sewers for the disposal of industrial waste.

Capitalism's need for growth exists on every level, from the individual enterprise to the system as a whole. The insatiable hunger of corporations is facilitated by imperialist expansion in search of ever greater access to natural resources, cheap labor and new markets. Capitalism has always been ecologically destructive, but in our lifetimes these assaults on the earth have accelerated. Quantitative change is giving way to qualitative transformation, bringing the world to a tipping point, to the edge of disaster. A growing body of scientific research has identified many ways in which small temperature increases could trigger irreversible, runaway effects - such as rapid melting of the Greenland ice sheet or the release of methane buried in permafrost and beneath the ocean - that would make catastrophic climate change inevitable.

Left unchecked, global warming will have devastating effects on human, animal and plant life. Crop yields will drop drastically, leading to famine on a broad scale. Hundreds of millions of people will be displaced by droughts in some areas and by rising ocean levels in others. Chaotic, unpredictable weather will become the norm. Air, water and soil will be poisoned. Epidemics of malaria, cholera and even deadlier diseases will hit the poorest and most vulnerable members of every society.

The impact of the ecological crisis is felt most severely by those whose lives have already been ravaged by imperialism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and indigenous peoples everywhere are especially vulnerable. Environmental destruction and climate change constitute an act of aggression by the rich against the poor.

Ecological devastation, resulting from the insatiable need to increase profits, is not an accidental feature of capitalism: it is built into the system's DNA and cannot be reformed away. Profit-oriented production only considers a short-term horizon in its investment decisions, and cannot take into account the long-term health and stability of the environment. Infinite economic expansion is incompatible with finite and fragile ecosystems, but the capitalist economic system cannot tolerate limits on growth; its constant need to expand will subvert any limits that

might be imposed in the name of "sustainable development." Thus the inherently unstable capitalist system cannot regulate its own activity, much less overcome the crises caused by its chaotic and parasitical growth, because to do so would require setting limits upon accumulation - an unacceptable option for a system predicated upon the rule: Grow or Die!

If capitalism remains the dominant social order, the best we can expect is unbearable climate conditions, an intensification of social crises and the spread of the most barbaric forms of class rule, as the imperialist powers fight among themselves and with the global south for continued control of the world's diminishing resources.

At worst, human life may not survive.

### *Capitalist Strategies for Change*

There is no lack of proposed strategies for contending with ecological ruin, including the crisis of global warming looming as a result of the reckless increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide. The great majority of these strategies share one common feature: they are devised by and on behalf of the dominant global system, capitalism.

It is no surprise that the dominant global system which is responsible for the ecological crisis also sets the terms of the debate about this crisis, for capital commands the means of production of knowledge, as much as that of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Accordingly, its politicians, bureaucrats, economists and professors send forth an endless stream of proposals, all variations on the theme that the world's ecological damage can be repaired without disruption of market mechanisms and of the system of accumulation that commands the world economy.

But a person cannot serve two masters - the integrity of the earth and the profitability of capitalism. One must be abandoned, and history leaves little question about the allegiances of the vast majority of policy-makers. There is every reason, therefore, to radically doubt the capacity of established measures to check the slide to ecological catastrophe.

And indeed, beyond a cosmetic veneer, the reforms over the past thirty-five years have been a monstrous failure. Isolated improvements do of course occur, but they are inevitably overwhelmed and swept away by the ruthless expansion of the system and the chaotic character of its production.

One example demonstrates the failure: in the first four years of the 21st Century, global carbon emissions were nearly three times as great per annum as those of the decade of the 1990s, despite the appearance of the Kyoto Protocols in 1997.

Kyoto employs two devices: the "Cap and Trade" system of trading pollution credits to achieve certain reductions in emissions, and projects in the global south - the so-called "Clean Development Mechanisms" - to offset emissions in the highly industrialized nations. These instruments all rely upon market mechanisms, which means, first of all, that atmospheric carbon dioxide becomes a commodity under the control of the same interests that created global warming. Polluters are not compelled to reduce their carbon emissions, but allowed to use their power over money to control the carbon market for their own ends, which include the devastating exploration for yet more carbon-based fuels. Nor is there a limit to the amount of emission credits which can be issued by compliant governments.

Since verification and evaluation of results are impossible, the Kyoto regime is not only incapable of controlling emissions, it also provides ample opportunities for evasion and fraud of all kinds. As even the *Wall Street Journal* put it in March, 2007, emissions trading "would make money for some very large corporations, but don't believe for a minute that this charade would do much about global warming."

The Bali climate meetings in 2007 opened the way for even greater abuses in the period ahead. Bali avoided any mention of the goals for drastic carbon reduction put forth by the best climate science (90% by 2050); it abandoned the peoples of the global south to the mercy of capital by giving jurisdiction over the process to the World Bank; and made offsetting of carbon pollution even easier.

In order to affirm and sustain our human future, a revolutionary transformation is needed, where all particular struggles take part in a greater struggle against capital itself. This larger struggle cannot remain merely negative and anti-capitalist. It must announce and build a different kind of society, and this is ecosocialism.

### *The Ecosocialist Alternative*

The ecosocialist movement aims to stop and to reverse the disastrous process of global warming in particular and of capitalist ecocide in general, and to construct a radical and practical alternative to the capitalist system. Ecosocialism is grounded in a transformed economy founded on the non-monetary values of social justice and ecological balance. It criticizes both capitalist "market ecology" and productivist socialism, which ignored the earth's equilibrium and limits. It redefines the path and goal of socialism within an ecological and democratic framework.

Ecosocialism involves a revolutionary social transformation, which will imply the limitation of growth and the transformation of needs by a profound shift away from quantitative and toward qualitative economic criteria, an emphasis on use-value instead of exchange-value.

These aims require both democratic decision-making in the economic sphere, enabling society to collectively define its goals of investment and production, and the collectivization of the means of production. Only collective decision-making and ownership of production can offer the longer-term perspective that is necessary for the balance and sustainability of our social and natural systems.

The rejection of productivism and the shift away from quantitative and toward qualitative economic criteria involve rethinking the nature and goals of production and economic activity in general. Essential creative, non-productive and reproductive human activities, such as householding, child-rearing, care, child and adult education, and the arts, will be key values in an ecosocialist economy.

Clean air and water and fertile soil, as well as universal access to chemical-free food and renewable, non-polluting energy sources, are basic human and natural rights defended by ecosocialism. Far from being "despotic," collective policy-making on the local, regional, national and international levels amounts to society's exercise of communal freedom and responsibility. This freedom of decision constitutes a liberation from the alienating economic "laws" of the growth-oriented capitalist system.

To avoid global warming and other dangers threatening human and ecological survival, entire sectors of industry and agriculture must be suppressed, reduced, or restructured and others must be developed, while providing full employment for all. Such a radical transformation is impossible without collective control of the means of production and democratic planning of production and exchange. Democratic decisions on investment and technological development must replace control by capitalist enterprises, investors and banks, in order to serve the long-term horizon of society's and nature's common good.

The most oppressed elements of human society, the poor and indigenous peoples, must take full part in the ecosocialist revolution, in order to revitalize ecologically sustainable traditions and give voice to those whom the capitalist system cannot hear. Because the peoples of the global south and the poor in general are the first victims of capitalist destruction, their struggles and demands will help define the contours of the ecologically and economically sustainable society in creation. Similarly, gender equality is integral to ecosocialism, and women's movements have been among the most active and vocal opponents of capitalist oppression. Other potential agents of ecosocialist revolutionary change exist in all societies.

Such a process cannot begin without a revolutionary transformation of social and political structures based on the active support, by the majority of the population, of an ecosocialist program. The struggle of labour - workers, farmers, the landless and the unemployed - for social justice is inseparable from the struggle for environmental justice.

Capitalism, socially and ecologically exploitative and polluting, is the enemy of nature and of labour alike.

Ecosocialism proposes radical transformations in:

1. the energy system, by replacing carbon-based fuels and biofuels with clean sources of power under community control: wind, geothermal, wave, and above all, solar power.
2. the transportation system, by drastically reducing the use of private trucks and cars, replacing them with free and efficient public transportation;
3. present patterns of production, consumption, and building, which are based on waste, inbuilt obsolescence, competition and pollution, by producing only sustainable and recyclable goods and developing green architecture;
4. food production and distribution, by defending local food sovereignty as far as this is possible, eliminating polluting industrial agribusinesses, creating sustainable agro-ecosystems and working actively to renew soil fertility.

To theorize and to work toward realizing the goal of green socialism does not mean that we should not also fight for concrete and urgent reforms right now. Without any illusions about "clean capitalism," we must work to impose on the powers that be - governments, corporations, international institutions - some elementary but essential immediate changes:

- drastic and enforceable reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases,
- development of clean energy sources,
- provision of an extensive free public transportation system,
- progressive replacement of trucks by trains,
- creation of pollution clean-up programs,
- elimination of nuclear energy, and war spending.

## *Environmentalism as if Winning Mattered*

These and similar demands are at the heart of the agenda of the Global Justice movement and the World Social Forums, which have promoted, since Seattle in 1999, the convergence of social and environmental movements in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

Environmental devastation will not be stopped in conference rooms and treaty negotiations: only mass action can make a difference. Urban and rural workers, peoples of the global south and indigenous peoples everywhere are at the forefront of this struggle against environmental and social injustice, fighting exploitative and polluting multinationals, poisonous and disenfranchising agribusinesses, invasive genetically modified seeds, biofuels that only aggravate the current food crisis. We must further these social-environmental movements and build solidarity between anticapitalist ecological mobilizations in the North and the South.

This Ecosocialist Declaration is a call to action. The entrenched ruling classes are powerful, yet the capitalist system reveals itself every day more financially and ideologically bankrupt, unable to overcome the economic, ecological, social, food and other crises it engenders. And the forces of radical opposition are alive and vital. On all levels, local, regional and international, we are fighting to create an alternative system based in social and ecological justice.

(For more information, visit the website of the Ecosocialist International Network: <http://ecosocialistnetwork.org/>)