

“The enemy here is no longer one nation, one region, or one polity. The enemy here, for all to see, is capital itself.”

IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. Each of us has a stake in this issue in a way that no movement has ever made as clear before, and the fact that we have a common opponent without requiring of ourselves a common ideology is a strength.

Those involved in this movement are asking different things from it. Some are asking for concessions from the existing structure and its three institutions, some are making demands of it, and others are calling for it to be

abolished and replaced with a new economic system. Among our own socialist ranks, there are people engaged in each approach, including representatives of socialist governments who are attempting to change things from inside the meetings. But what unites us is that people from every corner of the globe,

with different conditions of life, different politics, and different national loyalties, are in agreement that the power and policies of these unaccountable global institutions must be confronted.

Those of us who make the case for abolition argue that Bretton Woods was no magical Mount Sinai where superhuman souls decided something a half-century ago that we are incapable of undoing or improving upon. In fact, when one considers that in 1944 most of the nations that are most adversely affected by these policies today were not nations but *colonies* of the very imperial powers that created our current economic system, it would seem imperative that we dismantle and rebuild for the sake of democracy itself. To twist a phrase from that era, the only thing we have to fear is the power of our own ideas. Given the current direction of globalization, we certainly have nothing to lose.

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Environmental Justice: A Religious Socialist View

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Nature is God's creation, and all of us are part of the natural or created order. Hence, if we hurt the natural environment, we hurt ourselves. But that is only part of the story. From the standpoint of religious socialists, it is essential that we consider the categories of class, race, and gender whenever we speak of the natural environmental issues. The metaphor that “we are all in the same boat” is a limited concept.

In the early 1970s some of us were shouting for eco-justice—that is, the need to consider the social and economic effects of any action that had an impact on the natural environment, especially on the poor and minorities. Few of those voices were heard until many years later. The work of the United Church of Christ (1987) about the disproportionate number of toxic waste dumps near communities of people of color sounded the alarm, and “environmental racism” suddenly became a new reality. But it took the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) another ten years to do anything about it. And then it simply developed some fuzzy categories of assessing “environmental justice.” That is, EPA now asks those whose actions would have a negative impact on the natural environment to consider whether those actions would have disproportionate impacts on the poor and minority groups. That “scorecard” approach is simply inadequate to cope with the realities.

It should be no surprise that those with the lowest incomes are more vulnerable to the actions that pollute the environment, not because the project proponents are mean-spirited against

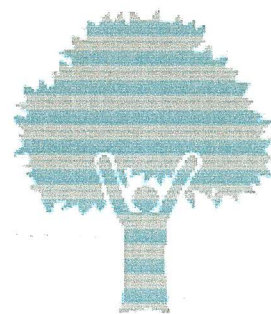
poor people or even overtly racist. It is because the poor and minority groups usually do not have the political or legal clout to stop projects.

Our cities and towns are filled with countless examples of environmental injustice. In the 1960s, for example, there was a proposal for a major highway project in the Boston region that would have cut through the largely black Roxbury community, as well as other low-income communities. Not surprisingly, the first homes to be torn down were in the Roxbury community. Demolition was stalled in the other communities. In the early 1970s, when the highway project was stopped, Roxbury was filled with many square miles of razed land, which are still in the process of being developed.

If we do not recognize the realities of race and class, we will miss the significance of the real environmental issues facing us today.

We Do To Nature What We Do To (Some) People

The exploitation of the natural environment has its analogue in the exploitation of people. There is an adage “We do to nature what we do to people.” But we know that all people are not equally affected. We should more properly say, “We do to na-



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ture what we do to some people." For instance, when a toxic waste dump seeps into the groundwater system and pollutes the drinking water supply, all people are not equally affected. At the first sign of cloudy water, the more affluent can turn to bottled drinking water. In U.S. society, race and class go hand in glove.

Class conflicts abound in environmental struggles, so that the more privileged classes are seen as pushing an environmental agenda that will hurt the less privileged. For instance, workers in the lumber industry are told by the logging industry, "If you save the trees, you will lose your jobs." When industrial corporations are pressured to clean up their act, they often counter with, "If we have to add expensive pollution controls to this plant, that will result in a loss of jobs." And the beat goes on. There is something fundamentally wrong with an economic system that offers such false choices to workers. It should never be a case of "It's your job or your health."

We know the need to build affordable housing, but environmental arguments are often used to stop such projects. "You cannot build on conservation land or on an ex-wetland." It is futile for those who want to protect the natural environment to battle with those who advocate the need for affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families, so it is essential that new coalitions be formed. Social/economic justice and environmental quality need to be seen as counterparts not as opposites.

It is encouraging to see new coalitions emerging that unite labor, the poor, and people of color in a common focus, as in Boston, where the Conservation Law Foundation works with community organizations on lead paint in houses and elevated lead levels in the blood of urban children, or in the Northwest, where members of the United Steelworkers walked off the job at Kaiser Aluminum in late 1998 and joined with environmentalists against the Maaxam Corp, owner of Kaiser Aluminum and Pacific Lumber Company. This latter consortium showed that environmentalists can reach beyond the typical wilderness concerns and join in the struggles of the working class.

Most recently, we saw coalitions at the recent demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle or against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in Washington, D. C. Are these coalitions a temporary phenomenon? Do such coalitions only work when there is a common target? Can such coalitions be sustained when we are addressing the building of an environmentally just society that considers the needs of the poor and minorities as well as the natural environment? We are not sure, but we must work and hope for it to be so.

What Does the Religious Socialist Bring to the Debate?

As religious socialists, we begin with an affirmation that the creation is God's creation and "it is good" (Gen 1) "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24) The natural or material world is not the work of a lesser deity. It is the handi-

work of the divine Creator. Hence, we are entrusted with the responsibility to care for it, and to be stewards of those precious gifts that God has given us to use. We do not own it—regardless of what the deed says, and regardless of the cries of the sacrosanct nature of "private property." From a religious perspective, the ultimate ownership of land in human hands is a fiction—it is entrusted to us for our responsible use. The same holds true for the air, the water, and the other natural resources contained in the natural order.

Although human beings have developed the skills of science and technology, and in the Jewish and Christian traditions have been given the powers to "name" the natural order (Gen 2), we should remember that such powers can be greatly misused or used for our own self-aggrandizement (see Gen 3—the story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden).

But we always remember that the God who created the whole creation also made human beings in the divine image as part of that creation—and each person has an inherent worth independent of his/her contributions to and status in society. That is a tough one to swallow in a competitive society that sees itself as a "meritocracy," but it is essential that we never forget it.

Furthermore, our God is a God of justice and righteousness, who champions the cause of the poor and the dispossessed—symbolized in the Hebrew Scriptures by the widow and the orphan. The liberation theologians have called for God's "preferential option for the poor."

Thus, a religious socialist cannot consider the natural environment independent from the issues of race, class, and gender.

There Is Still Much To Do

There is not enough space to recite a litany of actions to be taken to promote a more fair and sound environment. Let me close with just one example. On the first Earth Day in Boston in 1970 a dramatic event took place on City Hall Plaza. An automobile was clobbered by a sledgehammer, signifying the death of the private car. After 30 years, the private automobile is alive and well, and it is public transportation that is on the "endangered species list." There has been progress, however, but some of that progress is now being negated. For example, the benefits of the cleaner burning automobile engines with greater fuel economies—something that the auto industry vehemently resisted until the federal government mandated them to do it—are being eroded by the appearance of gigantic, gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles that dominate the landscape. It is again time for government regulation. The question that we must raise is, What are the effects of regulations on the natural environment and on the people, especially those of limited financial means and different skin colors? Unless these questions are asked together, we will get a distorted view of the environmental issue. So let's move on with our tasks!

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