

How to Make an Ecosocialist Revolution

Ian Angus

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How to Make an Ecosocialist Revolution

Meetings such as this play a vital role in building a movement that can stop the hell-bound train of capitalism, before it takes itself and all of humanity over the precipice. Building such a movement is the most important thing anyone can do today — so I'm honoured to have been invited to take part in your discussions.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Karl Marx predicted that unless capitalism was eliminated the great productive forces it unleashed would turn into destructive forces. And that's exactly what has happened.

Every day we see more evidence that capitalism, which was once the basis for an unprecedented wave of creativity and liberation, has transformed itself into a force for destruction, decay and death.

It directly threatens the existence of the human race, not to mention the existence of the millions of species of plants and animals with whom we share the Earth.

Many people have proposed technological fixes or political reforms to address various aspects of the global environmental crisis, and many of those measures deserve serious consideration. Some of them may buy us



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some time, some of them may delay the ecological day of reckoning.

Contrary to what some of our critics claim, no serious socialist is opposed to partial measures or reforms — we will actively support any measure that reduces, limits or delays the devastating effects of capitalism. And we will work with anyone, socialist or not, who seriously wants to fight for such measures. In fact, just try to stop us.

But as socialists, we know that there can be no lasting solution to the world's multiple environmental crises so long as capitalism remains the dominant economic and social system on this planet.

We do not claim to have all the answers, but we do have one big answer: the only basis for long-term, permanent change in the way humanity relates to the rest of nature, is an ecosocialist revolution.

If we don't make that transformation we may delay disaster, but disaster remains inevitable.

As the headline on *Climate and Capitalism* has always said: "Ecosocialism or barbarism: There is no third way."

But what do we mean by *ecosocialism*? And what do we mean by ecosocialist *revolution*?

What is ecosocialism?

There is no copyright on the word ecosocialism, and those who call themselves ecosocialists don't agree about everything. So what I'm going to say reflects my own perspective.

Ecosocialism begins with a critique of its two parents, ecology and Marxism.

Ecology, at its very best, gives us powerful tools for understanding how nature functions – not as separate events or activities, but as integrated, interrelated ecosystems. Ecology can and does provide essential insights into the ways that human activity is undermining the very systems that make all forms of life possible.

But while ecology has done very well at describing the damage caused by

humans, its lack of social analysis means that few ecologists have developed anything that resembles a credible program for stopping the destruction.

Unlike other animals, the relationship between human beings and our environment can't be explained by our numbers or by our biology — but that's where ecology typically stops.

In fact, when ecologists turn to social questions, they almost always get the answers wrong, because they assume that problems in the relationship between humanity and nature are caused by our numbers or by human nature, or that they are just a result of ignorance and misunderstandings.

If only we all knew the truth, the world would change. All we need to do is to tinker with taxes and markets, or maybe advertise birth control more widely, and all will be fine.

The lack of a coherent critique of capitalism has made most Green parties around the world ineffective — or, even worse, it has allowed them to become junior partners in neoliberal governments, providing green camouflage for reactionary policies.

Similarly, many of the biggest green NGOs long ago gave up on actually building an environmental movement, preferring to campaign for donations from corporate polluters. Because they don't understand capitalism, they think they can solve problems by being friendly with capitalists.

In contrast, Marxism's greatest strength is its comprehensive critique of capitalism, an analysis that explains why this specific social order has been both so successful and so destructive.

Marxism has also shown that another kind of society is both possible and necessary, a society in which destructive capitalist production is replaced by cooperative production, and in which capitalist property is replaced by a global commons.

What we now call ecology was fundamental to Marx's thought, and, as John Bellamy Foster has shown, in the 20th century Marxist scientists made major contributions to ecological thought. But on the whole, the Marxist movements of the 20th century either ignored environmental issues entirely,

or blithely deferred all consideration of the subject until after the revolution, when socialism would magically solve them all.

What's worse, some of the worst ecological nightmares of the 20th century occurred in countries that called themselves socialist. We only have to mention the nuclear horror of Chernobyl, or the poisoning and draining of the Aral Sea, to make clear that just eliminating capitalism won't save the world.

Now there is an easy answer to that — we could just say that those countries weren't socialist. They were state capitalist, or something else, so criticism of their environmental crimes is irrelevant. But green critics will rightly call that a cop-out.

People in the Soviet Union and the other soviet bloc countries thought they were building socialism. And for most people worldwide that was what socialism looked like.

So whether we call those societies socialist or give them some other label, we need to answer the underlying question: what makes us think that the next attempts to build socialist societies will do any better than they did?

Our answer has two parts.

The first is that eliminating profit and accumulation as the driving forces of the economy will eliminate capitalism's innate drive to pollute and destroy.

While mistaken policies and ignorance have caused some very serious ecological problems, the global crisis we face today isn't the result of mistaken policies and ignorance — it is the inevitable result of the way capitalism works.

With capitalism, an ecologically balanced world is *impossible*.

Socialism doesn't make it certain, but it will make it *possible*.

The second part of the answer is that history is not made by impersonal forces. The transition to socialism will be achieved by real people, and people can learn from experience.

This is demonstrated in practice by Cuba, which in the past 25 years has made huge strides towards building an ecologically sound economy, and

which has repeatedly been one of the few countries that meet the World Wildlife Fund's criteria for a globally sustainable society.

The lesson we must learn from that achievement and from the environmental failures of socialism in the 20th century is that ecology must have a central place in socialist theory, in the socialist program and in the activity of the socialist movement.

Ecosocialism works to unite the best of the green and the red while overcoming the weaknesses of each. It tries to combine Marxism's analysis of human society with ecology's analysis of our relationship to the rest of nature.

It aims to build a society that will have two fundamental and indivisible characteristics.

- It will be *socialist*, committed to democracy, to radical egalitarianism, and to social justice. It will be based on collective ownership of the means of production, and it will work actively to eliminate exploitation, profit and accumulation as the driving forces of our economy.
- And it will be *based on the best ecological principles*, giving top priority to stopping anti-environmental practices, to restoring damaged ecosystems, and to re-establishing agriculture and industry on ecologically sound principles.

A sentence in John Bellamy Foster's *The Ecological Rift* precisely and concisely explains ecosocialism's reason for being.

There can be no true ecological revolution that is not socialist; no true socialist revolution that is not ecological.¹

What is an ecosocialist revolution?

When we say *revolution*, we are talking about a profound change in the way humans relate to the earth, in how we produce and reproduce, in almost everything humans do and how we do it.

What we're aiming for is not just a reorganisation of capitalism, and not just changes in ownership, but for what Fred Magdoff, in an article in a

recent issue of *Monthly Review*, calls “a truly ecological civilization — one that exists in harmony with natural systems.”²

Magdoff lists eight characteristics that such a civilization would have.

It would:

1. Stop growing when basic human needs are satisfied;
2. Not entice people to consume more and more;
3. Protect natural life support systems and respect the limits to natural resources, taking into account needs of future generations;
4. Make decisions based on long-term societal/ecological needs, while not neglecting short-term needs of people;
5. Run as much as possible on current (including recent past) energy instead of fossil fuels;
6. Foster human characteristics and a culture of cooperation, sharing, reciprocity, and responsibility to neighbours and community;
7. Make possible the full development of human potential, and;
8. Promote truly democratic political and economic decision making for local, regional, and multiregional needs.

As Fred Magdoff says, a society with those characteristics would be “the opposite of capitalism in essentially all respects”.

Not easy or quick

Achieving such a change is absolutely essential — but we should not delude ourselves that it will happen simply or quickly.

I’ve found that most environmentalists and most socialists seriously underestimate just how big a task we have set ourselves, how big the change will have to be, how difficult it will be, and how long it will take.

Forty years ago, in 1971, Barry Commoner, one of the first modern socialists to write about the environmental crisis, estimated that in order to reverse the environmental destruction that he could *then* see in the United States and to rebuild industry and agriculture on an ecologically sound basis, “most of the nation’s resources for capital investment would need to

be engaged in the task of ecological reconstruction for at least a generation”.

The rate and extent of environmental destruction has accelerated rapidly in the four decades since Commoner wrote that. The time required and the cost of the repairs and reconstruction have increased substantially.

For example, the United Nations recently estimated that it will take 30 years to clean up the devastating damage caused by Shell Oil in the Ogoni peoples’ homeland in the Niger Delta. That’s for an area of just 386 square miles — about one-ninth the size of Sydney.

The Niger Delta is a particularly horrible example of capitalism’s ecocidal role, of course, but there are many more examples around the world, enough to dash any hope for an easy turnaround.

That means that the title of my talk today is a little misleading. I can’t tell you how to *make* an ecosocialist revolution, because the necessary changes will take decades, in circumstances we can’t predict.

What’s more, the transformation will undoubtedly require new knowledge, and new science.

To paraphrase Marx, there is no recipe book for the chefs of the ecological revolution.

Getting to the starting point

But what we can and must discuss is, how to get to the starting point.

One of the pioneers of revolutionary socialism and environmentalism was the great British poet and artist William Morris. In 1893, he described the starting point this way:

“The first real victory of the Social Revolution will be the establishment not indeed of a complete system of communism in a day, which is absurd, but of a revolutionary administration whose *definite and conscious aim* will be to prepare and further, in all available ways, human life for such a system.”

We could combine William Morris’s statement with Fred Magdoff’s terminology, to summarise the central goal of the ecosocialist movement today:

“A revolutionary administration whose *definite and conscious aim* will be to prepare and further, in all available ways, human life for an ecological civilisation.”

In our new book, *Too Many People?*, Simon Butler and I express that idea this way:

In every country, we need governments that break with the existing order, that are answerable only to working people, farmers, the poor, indigenous communities, and immigrants — in a word, to the victims of ecocidal capitalism, not its beneficiaries and representatives.

And we suggest some of the first measures such governments might take. Our suggestions include:

- Rapidly phasing out fossil fuels and biofuels, replacing them with clean energy sources;
- Actively supporting farmers to convert to ecological agriculture; defending local food production and distribution;
- Introducing free and efficient public transport networks;
- Restructuring existing extraction, production and distribution systems to eliminate waste, planned obsolescence, pollution and manipulative advertising, and providing full retraining to all affected workers and communities;
- Retrofitting existing homes and buildings for energy efficiency;
- Closing down all military operations at home and elsewhere; transforming the armed forces into voluntary teams charged with restoring ecosystems and assisting the victims of environmental disasters.

Our suggestions aren't carved in stone, and I'm sure many of you can think of many other essential changes.

For other valuable ideas about what such a government would do, I encourage you to also look at the “short term agenda for environmental activists” in the final chapter of *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism*, by John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, and at the program proposed in Australia in the Socialist Alliance Climate Charter.³

I stress that we shouldn't wait for an ecosocialist government to make those changes. On the contrary, we should be fighting for every one of those measures today, as central elements of our fight for a better world.

Those are first steps, just the beginning — building a fully ecological civilisation will involve much more.

The longer it takes us to build a movement that can get the process started, the more difficult the ecosocialist revolution will be.

Majority participation

I have stressed the complexity and size of the task before us not to discourage you, but to underline another essential point. Social changes this sweeping will not happen just because they are the right thing to do.

Good ideas are not enough. Moral authority isn't enough.

An ecosocialist revolution cannot be made by a minority. It cannot be imposed by politicians and bureaucrats, no matter how well meaning they might be.

It will require the active participation of the great majority of the people. In Marx's famous words: "The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the workers themselves."

This is not because democracy is morally superior, but because the necessary changes cannot be carried through, and will not be long-lasting, unless they are actively supported, created and implemented, by the broadest possible range of people.

Only majority support and involvement can possibly overcome the opponents of change.

The only way to overcome the forces that now rule, the forces of global destruction, is to organise a countervailing force that can stop them and remove them from power.

That's another fundamental truth about revolutions — there is no such thing as a win-win revolution, where everyone gains and no one loses. In a real revolution, the people who had power and privileges in the old society

lose their power and privileges in the new.

A few of those people may join in the revolutionary cause, and if so we will welcome them to our cause. But most of them probably will not support the majority.

Today, as in every human society for thousands of years, there are powerful social groups that benefit from the existing situation, and they will resist change no matter how obvious the need for change may be.

We only have to look at the present US Congress or at Australia's parliament to see powerful people who will resist change even to the point of destroying the world.

The climate change deniers are not isolated cranks. They are well-financed politicians, backed by some of the world's richest corporations, and they are prepared to bring the world down to protect their power.

You know, whenever we talk about revolution, the powers that be accuse us of plotting violence. In fact, most of the ecosocialists I know are pretty nonviolent in their personal lives. I admit that many of us in Canada like hockey, and I'm sure there are some footy fans here today, but that doesn't translate into our political outlook!

We don't want violence, and we will be pleased if the transition to ecosocialism is entirely peaceful.

Unfortunately, unlike in professional sports, what happens in a revolution isn't entirely up to us.

As we've seen in many countries, the democratic election of popular governments by huge majorities has never stopped defenders of the old order from trying to regain power through violent means.

And as the people of Venezuela and Bolivia have shown, the best way to minimise and counteract the violence of the reactionaries is to mobilise the largest possible number of people to defend the revolutionary process.

A tale of two cities

What forces will determine the outcome of the global environmental crisis in the 21st century? Less than two years ago we had a strong foretaste of the class line-up.

In December 2009, the world's rich countries sent delegations to Copenhagen with instructions not to save the climate, but to block any action that might weaken their capitalist economies or harm their competitive positions in world markets.

And they succeeded.

The backroom deal imposed by US President Barack Obama was, as Fidel Castro wrote, "nothing more than a joke". The follow-up deal that they negotiated in Cancun was no better.

The Copenhagen and Cancun meetings made it clear that our rulers do not want to solve the climate and ecological crises. Period.

They place their narrow economic and electoral interests before the survival of humanity. They will not change course willingly.

Five months after the Copenhagen meeting, a very different meeting took place in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

At the invitation of Bolivian president Evo Morales, some 35,000 activists, many of them indigenous people, came from more than 130 countries, to do what Obama and his allies refused to do in Copenhagen — to develop an action program to save the environment.

They drafted a People's Agreement that places responsibility for the climate crisis on the capitalist system and on the rich countries that "have a carbon footprint five times larger than the planet can bear".⁴

The World People's Conference adopted 18 major statements, covering topics from climate refugees to indigenous rights to technology transfer, and much more.

It is impossible to imagine such a program coming out of any meeting of the wealthy powers, or out of any United Nations conference.

Those two meetings, in Copenhagen and Cochabamba, symbolise the

great divide in the struggle for the future of the Earth and humanity.

On one side, a meeting dominated by the rich and powerful, determined to save their wealth and privileges, even if the world burns.

On the other side, indigenous people, small farmers and peasants, progressive activists and working people of all kinds, determined to save the world from the rich and powerful.

The Cochabamba conference was a big step towards a global movement that can actually change the world. It showed, in a preliminary way, the alliance of forces that must be forged in each country, and internationally, to end the environmentally destructive capitalist system.

We need students and academics and feminists and scientists — but we will not be able to change the world unless we win the active participation of working people, farmers, indigenous peoples and all of the oppressed.

These are the forces that the green left must ally with. These are the forces that we must win to the perspective of ecosocialist revolution.

What to do now?

Now at this point, you should be asking, “How can we do that? How do we win mass support for the program and objectives we know are essential?”

That is exactly the right question to ask. Because if we can’t translate our ideas and our program into action, then our ideas are irrelevant, and so are we.

To cite another famous comment by Marx, our task is not just to explain the world, our task is to change it.

As Marxists, we use our analysis of the world as a basis for determining what to do. First we ask, “what’s going on?” Then we ask, “What is to be done?”

When we ask those questions today, we are all intensely aware that although the need for revolution is very clear to us, we are in a minority, not just in society at large, but even within the left and within the environmental movement.

As Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson has written, we live in a time when for most people, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”.

Most green activists do not see capitalism as the primary problem — or, if they do, they don’t believe an ecosocialist revolution is possible or desirable.

So the key task before us is not to proclaim the revolution from every street corner, but rather to find ways to work with the broadest possible range of people as they are today.

Latin American Marxist Marta Harnecker has expressed it this way: Being radical is not a matter of advancing the most radical slogans, or of carrying out the most radical actions ...

Being radical lies rather in creating spaces where broad sectors can come together and struggle. For as human beings we grow and transform ourselves in the struggle.

Understanding that we are many and are fighting for the same objectives is what makes us strong and radicalises us.

It is through struggles for change that we can win the people who today find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

We cannot artificially create majority support, but fortunately we can depend on capitalism and imperialism to help us.

Long ago, Marx and Engels said that what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, are its own gravediggers.

In 2011, we have seen capitalism’s future gravediggers come into direct conflict with authoritarian governments, with imperialism, and with capitalist austerity programs, in countries as diverse as Chile, Spain, Greece, Tunisia, Egypt, Britain and even the United States.

We cannot tell in advance where mass struggles will break out, or what forms they will take. That’s not under our control. The best slogans in the world won’t do it. But capitalism will make it happen.

The real question is, will the next radicalisation peter out, or be defeated

— or will it move forward, and ultimately challenge capitalism itself?

The movement we need

There are no guarantees. Marxism is not deterministic. The ecosocialist revolution is not inevitable. It will only happen if people consciously decide that is necessary, and take the steps needed to bring it about.

As long ago as 1848, Marx and Engels posed an alternative: the class struggle would lead *either* to “a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large,” ... *or* to “the common ruin of the contending classes.”

In this century of environmental crisis, the common ruin of all, the destruction of civilisation, is a very real possibility.

One factor that will determine the outcome — in my opinion the single most important factor — is the role that will be played by the people in this room, and by others like you around the world.

Spontaneous uprisings such as those we’ve seen in Europe and North Africa this year are inevitable, but they are not, by themselves, sufficient to bring into being “a revolutionary administration whose definite and conscious aim will be to prepare and further, in all available ways, human life for an ecological civilisation”.

That will not be achieved unless we are successful in creating, in advance, an organised movement with a clear vision, an ecosocialist program, that can bridge the gap between the spontaneous anger of millions of people and the beginning of the ecosocialist revolution.

Meetings such as this one can be part of the process of building that movement.

I don’t have a blueprint for how to build the movement we need. Indeed, one of the lessons we can learn from the failures of socialism in the 20th century is that centrally-dictated, one-size-fits-all plans for movement building will always fail.

Rather than a blueprint, let me suggest four characteristics that movements committed to ecosocialism must share if they are to have any

chance of success.

1. Ecosocialists will extend and apply ecosocialism's analysis and program

This might seem obvious, but it's very important. In the past century, many Marxists tried to freeze Marxism. After the death of Marx, or Engels, or Lenin, or Trotsky, or Mao — each group had its own cut-off point — their Marxism stopped developing.

From then on, no matter what the situation, all they had to do was consult the sacred texts. All of the answers were there. Some organisations on the left still do this today.

That approach is completely alien to Marxism, which gives us a method, but not all the answers. It doesn't even give us all the questions.

In their lifetimes, Marx and Engels studied the scientific, technological and other discoveries of their time, and learned from the struggles of their day. They used their new knowledge to extend, deepen or change their political conclusions.

Ecosocialism must follow their example.

There is not, and *there will not be*, a perfect and immutable ecosocialist program, no document we can point to and say, "that's it, no more changes, we know what to do in all circumstances".

A key task for ecosocialists everywhere is to take the beginning points that ecosocialism offers today, and to build on them using the method of Marxism, the best scientific work of our time and the lessons we learn in struggles for change. Then we must apply our new understanding in a wide variety of places and circumstances.

This hard to do, because it requires us to *think*, to understand our situations and respond appropriately and creatively, not just repeat the same old slogans.

Only if we do that can ecosocialism contribute effectively to saving the Earth.

2. Ecosocialists will be pluralist and open

Another lesson we can learn from the 20th century is that monolithic socialist grouplets do not turn into mass movements. They stagnate and decay, they argue and they split, but they don't change the world.

So I want to emphasise that I am not urging you to rush out and found yet another sect.

Ecosocialism is not a separate organisation, it is a movement to win existing red and green groups and individuals to an ecosocialist perspective.

Our ecosocialist programs define who we are, they are the glue that holds us together. But within that broad framework, we need to understand that none of us has a monopoly on truth and none of us has the magical keys to the ecosocialist kingdom.

We will undoubtedly disagree on many issues, and our debates will be vigorous.

But if you agree that “there can be no true ecological revolution that is not socialist; no true socialist revolution that is not ecological,” then what unites us is more important than our differences.

We need to build a democratic ecosocialist movement together.

3. Ecosocialists will be internationalist and anti-imperialist

Within the broad environmental movement, ecosocialists must be the strongest voices for global climate justice.

All serious environmentalists must be internationalists, if only because ecosystems don't respect national borders.

In particular, there is no national solution to climate change. It must be fought for country-by-country, but only international change can defeat it. International communication, collaboration, and solidarity are absolutely essential.

But for those of us who live in the wealthy countries, the imperialist countries, there must be much more to our internationalism.

It's been said many times that the people of the global South, and

indigenous people everywhere, are the primary victims of climate change and other forms of environmental destruction.

What isn't said as often, but is even more important, is that the primary environmental criminals are "our" capitalists in the North.

That places a special responsibility on ecosocialists in the wealthy countries to combat the policies of our governments and of the corporations that are based in our countries.

Today, the most powerful and important struggles for ecological justice are taking place in the so-called Third World.

At the barest minimum, we in the imperialist countries need to publicise those movements and expose the role our home-grown capitalists play. We need to show our solidarity as concretely as we can.

We must give particular emphasis and support to the demands raised in the Cochabamba Peoples Agreement.

- We must demand that our governments give financial support for adaptation to climate change, including the development of ecologically sound agriculture.
- We must demand direct transfer of renewable energy and other technologies, so that the poorest countries can have economic development without contributing to global warming. (I want to stress that unless and until we win this, no one in the North has any right to criticise the energy and development choices made by progressive movements and governments in the Third World.)
- We must oppose so-called market solutions, and the commodification of nature. This includes rejecting carbon trading in all its forms.
- We must welcome climate refugees to our countries, offering them decent lives with full human rights.

4. Ecosocialists will actively participate in and build movements for a better world

Finally, and most important, ecosocialists must be activists.

We need to slow capitalism's ecocidal drive as much as possible and to reverse it where we can, to win every possible victory over the forces of destruction. As I've said, our rulers will not willingly change — but mass opposition can force them to act, even against their will.

There are many environmental issues facing the world today, and I'm sure that ecosocialists will be active in a wide variety of campaigns.

But the scope and potential destructiveness of the climate emergency make it the most important issue, and we need to give it the highest priority.

Our goal must be to bring together everyone — socialists, liberals, deep greens, trade unionists, feminists, indigenous activists and more — everyone who is willing to demand that governments act decisively to bring down greenhouse gas emissions.

And at the same time, we need to unite the forces that understand the need to go beyond defensive battles and lay the basis for a movement that can in fact initiate the ecosocialist revolution.

Fortunately those two tasks are not in conflict. Fighting for immediate gains against capitalist destruction and fighting for the ecosocialist future aren't separate activities, they are aspects of one integrated process.

It is through united struggles for immediate gains and environmental reforms that working people and farmers and indigenous people can build the organisations and the collective knowledge they need to defend themselves and advance their interests.

The victories they win in partial struggles will help to build the confidence needed to take on bigger targets.

And it is only by participating in and building such struggles that the ecosocialist movement can grow, can win a hearing from wider numbers of people, and can ultimately make an ecosocialist revolution possible.

The challenge we face

The People's Agreement adopted in Cochabamba eloquently expresses the challenge before us.

Humanity confronts a great dilemma: to continue on the path of capitalism, depredation, and death, or to choose the path of harmony with nature and respect for life.

It is imperative that we forge a new system that restores harmony with nature and among human beings.

And for there to be balance with nature, there must first be equity among human beings.

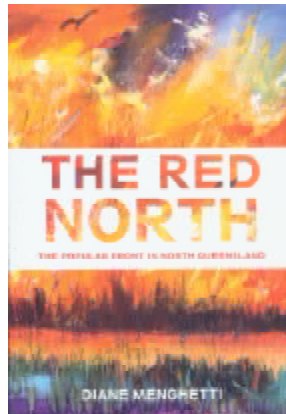
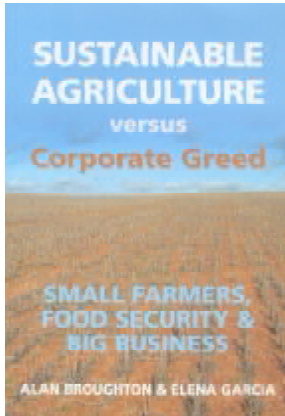
There, in three sentences, is the case for building a movement to save the world, the case for an ecosocialist revolution.

As I've said, it will not be easy, but I cannot think of a more important and worthwhile cause.

Working together, we can put an end to capitalism, before it puts an end to us.

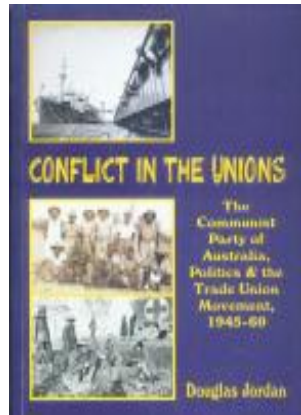
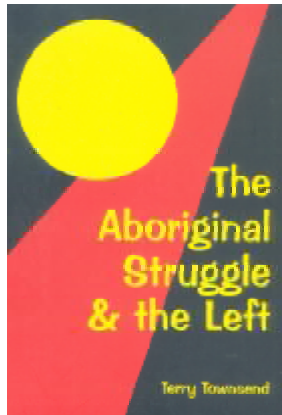
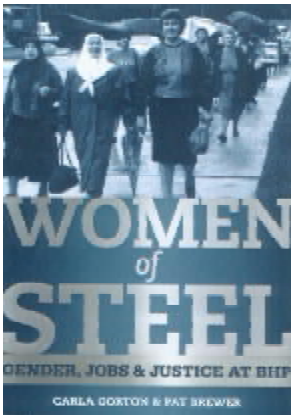
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