

Earth Day and May Day

Two Views of the Future

*An address delivered at a Socialist Labor Party
May Day Celebration, Berkeley, Calif., May 6, 1990.*

By Robert Bills

Socialist Labor Party of America
P.O. Box 218
Mountain View, CA 94042-0218
www.slp.org • socialists@slp.org

Earth Day and May Day

Two Views of the Future

Comrades and Friends:

I happened to be watching television one night last month when a woman came on the screen to deliver one of those so-called “free speech” messages I’m sure you’re all familiar with.

It wasn’t something I had planned to watch, so I wasn’t prepared to take down any notes. I have no idea who the woman was or what group or organization she represented, and I have forgotten most of what she had to say.

What I do remember, however, is that her topic was the 20th anniversary of Earth Day and the fact that demonstrations would be held on April 22 in conjunction with the occasion. No doubt her main purpose was to urge people to participate in those activities as a way of expressing their personal concern over the environment and environmental issues.

The one thing she said that stuck with me was her description of Earth Day. She said it was different from other holidays in a very important respect. It was different from holidays, like the Fourth of July, which mark the anniversaries of historic events.

Earth Day was different, she said, because it celebrated the future—or the possibility of a future in which humanity would once again be able to live in harmony with our natural surroundings. It was an occasion on which people could gather to express their wish for such a future, as well as to learn more about the extent to which the environment has been damaged and the fears that damage has created about the future.

Her description of Earth Day as a holiday of future worth fighting for struck me because it reminded me of something Daniel De Leon once said about May Day—the international working-class holiday that is the reason for our gathering together here this afternoon.

“May Day,” said De Leon, “attests, as it symbolizes, the oneness of the interests... and of the aims of the proletariat of the world. It is a holiday such as no age could produce but that we live in.”

“All other festivals,” De Leon added, “look backward for their reason.

Socialist Labor Party

May Day looks forward. . . . It is not the commemoration of an event that is gone by; it is the harbinger of The Event toward which all ages have been centering their efforts—the emancipation of the human race from the bondage of arduous toil for existence, the Socialist or Cooperative Commonwealth.”

If May Day and Earth Day are similar in this one respect—that both look ahead to a time when the massive social, economic and environmental problems of today are converted into memories of the past—the similarity is a limited one. The similarity begins and ends on a point of sentiment. Socialists, and non-Socialists who are simply concerned for the future, differ on how that future is to be achieved. The difference that separates them in spite of the similarity of their aspirations in this one important respect is a difference over causes and solutions.

Many environmentalists know and understand the connection that exists between all forms of environmental pollution and corporate greed. They are not oblivious to the fact that efforts to force the government to adopt and enforce laws and regulations to set standards for the protection of the environment have been largely ineffectual. They are not deceived by the few showcase successes that have been pointed to by the government, by certain industries and by the mass media as progress toward the goal of cleaning up the air, the water, the land and the seas. They can't help but be conscious of the fact that governmental measures have fallen far short of their declared goals, and that reform legislation has created no real obstacle to the ongoing destruction of the very natural resources and surroundings they were designed to protect. And they know that the few showcase successes are, in fact, more show than success.

And yet, few seem able or willing to take the one additional step in their reasoning that would convert their concern for the environment and their knowledge of the source of the problem into an effective strategy for putting an end to its destruction. Why this resistance to logical conclusions from an overwhelming body of evidence linking the problem to the profit motive?

The answer is not easy to arrive at, and it obviously poses one of the greatest obstacles that stand between society and its ability to deal effectively with the environmental question.

SYSTEMIC CAUSES

One part of that answer unquestionably lies in the failure to link corporate greed and governmental collusion to the capitalist system as a system.

There is more at work to explain the capitalist destruction of the environment than simple greed. Greed obviously plays an enormous part. But much of that greed is borne of fear—the fear of losing business;

Earth Day and May Day

worse, the fear of being driven out of business and into the ranks of the working class.

That fear, in turn, is a natural result of the normal workings of the capitalist system, based as it is on the private ownership of the means of production and an exploitative system of wage labor.

Capitalism functions the way it does for a reason. And that reason has nothing at all to do with the individual characteristics of those who happen to own and control the means of production, and who, therefore, bear the main brunt of responsibility for the ongoing destruction of the environment.

The Socialist Labor Party has always held the view that if it were possible for the capitalist system to reconcile its contradictions and do away with the evil effects of its operations, it would do so promptly and without much fanfare. It would do so, not for altruistic reasons, not out of any special concern for the working class or for the natural environment, but in order to dispense with the ever present fear that the anti-social effects of its operation will ultimately come to a head and lead to the system's irrevocable collapse.

But the Socialist Labor Party has never hesitated to point out that the capitalist class, and especially the political state, have failed at virtually every attempt made to iron out the contradictions of the system as they manifest themselves in creating and compounding a dizzying array of social and economic problems. Not one of the major problems capitalist society brought into the world over the last hundred years or so has been effectively dealt with by conscious and deliberate efforts to come to grips with it.

It doesn't matter in what direction we look—the same monotonous repetition of failure to effectively cope with major social problems makes itself felt. The poisoning of the environment—as important and ominous as it is; as pressing as the need is to reverse the trend—can no more be isolated and treated as a distinct social ailment produced by capitalism than can periodic economic crises, unemployment, poverty, or a hundred and one other social maladies that could be identified.

CAPITALISTS AND ACCOMPLICES

In the massive set of notes that Karl Marx wrote in preparation of the third volume of his monumental work on how the capitalist system operates—the work we know as *Capital*—he made the following observation:

“From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear as absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructu-

Socialist Labor Party

aries, and, like [concerned parents], they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.”

But who among us can question the fact that capitalists do use the Earth as if it was theirs and theirs alone, and that the politicians who are supposed to act as guardians for all of society have been their accomplices in the ongoing, massive destruction of our natural environment?

Indeed, the rapid rate at which the country is being converted into a continental-sized waste bin of industrial pollutants and poisons gives eloquent testimony to the extent to which the politicians of the two major parties have been in collusion with the owners of the nation's industries.

Despite the fact that the Democratic and Republican politicians have collaborated to conjure up a mountain-high mass of antipollution legislation over the past 30 years or so, the massive destruction of the air we breathe, the water we drink and the soil from which our sustenance is drawn has continued and grown dramatically worse.

At this late date in the steady advance of environmental destruction there should be no doubt in the minds of the great mass of people what the source of the problem is. If there was ever a socially generated problem confronting us that pointed an unmistakable finger of guilt at the social system under which we live and produce, surely the problem of environmental destruction is that one!

Millions of working-class men and women throughout the industrialized world participated in Earth Day demonstrations. But many millions more stayed home, in no small measure because they had little faith that demonstrations could have a genuine effect. One factor at work was the plain common sense of workers who readily grasped the significance of the fact that Earth Day had been co-opted by politicians and by many of the corporations responsible for the environmental destruction Earth Day was supposed to call attention to. Even *Newsweek*, reporting on one of its surveys, had to concede the point.

“One reason for the general skepticism,” it reported, “may be that Americans clearly think that, on one level, the observance [of Earth Day] is a public relations gambit. Seventy-three percent [of those surveyed] think the large number of corporations supporting Earth Day are actually more concerned with good public relations than making the world a safer, cleaner place.”

But what the capitalist owners of industry are really concerned with ultimately is not their “public image.” What they are concerned with is the preservation of their system, and of profits.

On a previous occasion, I posed the question: “Do capitalists use our air, water and soil as their private dumping grounds because they are too stupid to understand the consequences, or because they are too

Earth Day and May Day

intent in their pursuit of profit to rationally evaluate what their actions will eventually lead to?

“Perhaps it is a mixture of both. But the fact that they continue heedless of all warnings ranks among the primary reasons why America’s working men and women simply cannot afford to leave control of the nation’s industrial capacity in the hands of its capitalist owners. And the failure of the politicians to stop pollution is reason enough to conclude that both political parties that uphold capitalism are not capable of providing for the well-being of the American people.”

Many years ago a woman from California wrote to the National Office of the Socialist Labor Party to express her concern over the destruction of one of our state’s unusual and majestic natural resources—the giant redwood trees. Apparently she wanted to know where the SLP stood on the environmental question, and how we viewed the efforts of those who were concerned about the rapid rate in which they were being cut down. Arnold Petersen, who was then the Party’s National Secretary, responded in a way that, to me, sums up how we continue to look on the larger environmental problem and what must be done to deal with it in an effective and decisive manner. This is what he wrote:

“I am heart and soul with you in indignation over the destruction of our majestic and irreplaceable redwood trees, and consider it a crime to sacrifice them for sordid and private profit-making purposes. But to join actively in fighting the lumber interests in this respect we cannot do. The destruction (past and present) of this gift of nature is but one of the many crimes committed by capitalist interests, and to single out any particular one would not only be futile, but diversionary. As you surely know, we fight the cause and not the countless effects of the criminal capitalist system.

“I acknowledge that,” he continued, “it would be a crime and a tragedy if the redwoods were destroyed, but so is the murdering of little children in Vietnam and elsewhere in capitalism’s criminal wars.

“To allow our hearts to sway us, instead of being guided by our minds, would be to engage us in secondary, however important, pursuits, giving an interminable lease to a system that cannot be mended but surely must be ended lest we lose not only nature’s heritage, but a viable future on this Earth as well.”

If that was true 23 years ago when it was written, how much more to the point is it today! Concern over such things as the destruction of the redwoods, and rather simple references to air pollution and water pollution current at the time, hardly begin to convey an accurate picture of the extent to which environmental destruction has proceeded since those lines were written. In yet another sense, Earth Day had a similarity to what De Leon said of May Day—no other age but this one of wanton capitalist destruction of our natural surroundings could have produced it.

Socialist Labor Party

SOCIAL RELATIONS MUST CHANGE

The fact is that there are a host of problems resulting from the fact that modern technology generally has outstripped capitalist society and its institutions. And the social changes necessary to accommodate technological developments and eliminate their negative effects are the same as those necessary to deal with all the contradictions and dangers with which the present society and its institutions confront us: namely, a complete social revolution that will remove the means of life from private ownership or bureaucratic control, and eliminate the profit motive as the incentive for production.

In their place we must establish a society based on social ownership and democratic control of all the socially necessary instruments of production, distribution and social services—all of them to be operated to satisfy the needs and wants of all.

Not only would such a society—a socialist society—be competent to control or eliminate the dangers that certain technology poses, it would harness and direct its use to fulfill the very best of its potentials to serve the needs of society. In the words of Danish Marxist Gustav Bang:

“The great promises which all technical progress holds out of a higher life and culture for society as a whole become, under capitalism, so many promissory notes which only socialism can redeem. That mass of inventions and discoveries, which otherwise could serve to promote human happiness, becomes under capitalism a scourge for the great mass in society, a means for the capitalists to extract newer and increased profits through the exploitation of the working class.”

Indeed, at this late stage of capitalist disintegration, its mad drive for profits not only results in an intensification of the exploitation of the workers, it constitutes a distinct menace to the continued existence of civilization and humanity itself.

Earth Day, a product of this capitalist misuse of our world, is a reflex of the system's effects, and it is at its effects that its promoters—the sincere as well as the opportunistic among them—meant to draw our attention.

May Day—also a product of the evil effects of capitalism—is meant to draw our attention to the cause of the system's evil effects, and to promote an awareness that only a fundamentally different organization of society, in which the motive is not profit but the desire to live full and prosperous lives in harmony with our natural environment, will prevail.