

Climate Change is a Class Issue

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Climate change will only break out of its eco bubble if we understand not only the impacts, but also the opportunities that tackling it effectively can open up for greater economic and social justice.

On the Left there are few people who dispute that we should do something about climate change and the environment. But unfortunately the discussion usually stops there. This is partly due to the usual reasons that politicians (and voters) find climate change difficult to deal with: there is an assumption that it is happening a long way away in space and time and the things we have been asked to do seem to be tiny in comparison to the scale of the challenge. ‘What real difference will it make if I switch off the hall light when you tell me the glaciers are melting?’ is a very reasonable position to take. Or there is a now a fatalistic belief that it is irreversible so we may as well burn.

In reality, we are now at a moment where climate action is not only urgent, but feasible. Clean technology is deployable and economic. We can decouple global economic growth from dependence on fossil fuels. The Solutions Project at Stanford University estimates there could be more than 250,000 construction jobs and nearly 500,000 maintenance jobs in 100 per cent renewable energy by 2050 in the UK alone. They estimate that we could reduce our energy demand by 44 per cent, cut health costs and reduce deaths from pollution by 20,000 a year.

We are at the beginning of an extraordinary industrial revolution. The Left, or at least the Labour Party, must be the voice of the labour interest in ensuring that this one drives social and economic justice more effectively than the last one. This is a time for making the case for investment in the infrastructure we will need for the next hundred years, not just patching up the clapped-out infrastructure we have relied on for the last century.

In a domestic context, climate change needs to be understood as an issue of class, of health and of the economy. Without understanding it in this way, the Left will always give it a nod while failing to integrate it into the wider causes of social justice.

Climate change threatens the basic needs of many communities. No one can watch the television footage of families emptying their front rooms of water and waterlogged furniture in Cumbria, Yorkshire, the West Country or Lancashire and remain unmoved by the reality of more extreme weather. These people are not wealthy and often they are now being refused home or business insurance. People who have always struggled will struggle even more as the safety and security of their homes and livelihoods are put under more strain.

It will be the communities linked by only one bridge, with poor roads, with only one shop, dependent on one industry, business or factory, that bear the brunt when the rains come, the harvest fails or the transport links go down. In cities it will be those in poor housing that endure the worst of extreme heat in summer, flash floods and exhausted sewers. Bad design and lack of maintenance mean that architectural assaults on the working class can have long lead-in times.

Poor infrastructure is more prevalent in poorer communities. Our short-term politics tends towards make-do-and-mend rather than the transformation of the public realm beyond the quarters of the super-wealthy. It is no great surprise that it is the big banking firms, the property developers and the insurance companies of the City of London that prioritise sustainability in their buildings and the surrounding area.

But the rich won't be able to buy themselves out of this problem forever. Just as the super-rich of nineteenth century London for years ducked the worst impacts of cholera and the filthy water of London by 'summering' in Bath and other spa

towns, eventually the impact of extreme weather conditions will make even their modern-day equivalents' lives difficult – if not unbearable. London built its sewers because clean water was finally recognised as a public good that would benefit all. Tackling climate change and its impacts will require a similar kind of collective effort: this time the Left should be making the case for the investment because without it, it will be workers and their families and dependents who suffer more.

It is the poorest who live near the most polluted roads, it is the poorest elderly and infirm that suffer from dirty air, and it is poorer children who suffer long-term impacts from breathing in pollution.

Imagine instead that we argued the case for the new kinds of cars to be built here in the UK, creating jobs for our workers that they could feel proud of, rather than clinging to old technologies that harm our children. Imagine if we could generate energy, and store it in our own homes – not as some flight of fancy on Channel 4's *Grand Designs*, but built into the fabric of our communities. Imagine what it would be like if our planners designed our homes and our communities so that we could walk safely, access public transport or use a car that didn't contribute to the deaths of thousands through pollution. Imagine what that might do for the active lifestyles of our citizens who suffer from diabetes and obesity.

Without our active engagement, 'environmental' policies end up in the hands of those who don't factor in the risks of creating greater inequalities. Those who would ban diesel cars without a thought for the old lady who relies on her local cab firm to get her to the shops once a week. Those who would have the nerve to tell people already struggling to pay their bills that paying a bit extra to save the polar bear is worth it. Those who urge everyone to 'get on their bike', unaware of the Tebbit overtones when that injunction is directed at the infirm, disabled or just downright scared. Change is needed but in a way that reduces inequality rather than exacerbating it.

The Left doesn't have a monopoly on this agenda any more, as savvy politicians of all colours wake up to climate reality – both the threats of not acting and the opportunities that flow from acting now. From Milton Keynes to Swansea, Blackpool to Southampton, civic leadership is showing there are economic

opportunities to be seized as well as improvements for health and wellbeing for their residents.

There is a global context to this too. We have a climate change denier in the White House, but leaders at state level in the US are getting on with it – seeing jobs and growth as the drivers of climate action. The international community is standing firm and insists that even if the US is going to abandon this agenda, no one else will. That's important. For us in the UK, Brexit makes this harder as standards risk being watered down and reliable markets become trickier to access. But if the Left makes a mainstream case for jobs and growth, health and wellbeing, the prize is ownership of the next industrial revolution and greater justice at home and abroad.

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