

Why the Greens fail

Not a day goes by without the problems of the environment being featured in the press and on radio and television. Particularly since the industrial revolution, there have been developed vastly increased powers of production which have spread across the planet and which are being operated in a very destructive way. So the question is: how do we establish a society in which all people are able to cooperate to provide a decent life for each other which at the same time will be a society which is in balance with nature?

The Socialist Party holds that only socialism can set up the relationships of cooperation, the freedom and the rational control over our affairs which can get us out of the mess we're in. For all their good intentions, and for all their apparent radicalism, the policies of the Green Party are impractical because they stand no chance of establishing the kind of world they want to see.

The destructive nature of modern production has developed as part of capitalism. Because we live in a competitive, profit-motivated system enterprises come under an irresistible pressure to use the cheapest and most labour efficient methods. There is no choice about this. Companies simply have to go for low cost options and cannot afford to worry about the ecological consequences of this. To choose high cost options would be to commit economic suicide.

Under capitalism the production and distribution of goods takes place - and can only take place - according to the economic laws which govern the profitable circulation of capital. These laws are of an absolutely compelling nature. You can break the criminal law and sometimes get away with it, but you cannot break the laws which regulate the profit system without suffering financial loss or going bankrupt. What this means is that production methods cannot be chosen on their merits, as being environmentally friendly.

Constraints of Market System

The Central Electricity Generating Board is a state capitalist enterprise which every year throws up 4.2 million tons of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere. It's not the only villain. West Germany has been putting up 3.5 million tons every year and the countries of the EEC have been putting up over 20 million tons.

In 1984, the British government came under pressure to reduce its emissions by 30 per cent. It refused because the cost would have been £1,000m. At the time British capitalism was struggling to get out of a deep depression in which there were nearly 4 million unemployed and in these circumstances the British government was not in a position to add £1 billion to its energy costs. You only get out of a depression by becoming more competitive, by improving the prospect of profit and by improving investment confidence. You can only achieve these things by lowering not increasing your overall production costs. This is a fundamental and compelling fact of market life.

Everybody must be aware of the tragic absurdity of the situation. We've got the urgent need to eliminate these harmful acid emissions and not just by 30 per cent. We've got the techniques for doing it, and there are millions of unemployed, so there's a vast availability of labour for the work. Yet we are unable to bring these things together. We are held back by the economic

constraints of the market system. We cannot do it because the profits of a privileged class minority who own and control the means of life come before the needs of the community. There are no sane grounds on which this can be justified.

The only way to get out of the mess is to establish socialism which will be based on common ownership, production solely for need and democratic control. With common ownership all means of production and distribution and all resources will be held in common by the whole community.

You can't have the oil resources of the North Sea or anywhere else owned by oil companies or governments, you can't have the land owned by agribusiness and exploited by them for profit, you can't have the means of life, mining, industry, manufacture and transport owned by capital, and at the same time expect to run a decent society based on cooperation and social responsibility. It is just not possible. If you want a world of cooperation and responsibility then all these means of life must be brought under the democratic control of the whole community on the basis of common ownership.

On this basis, instead of the wages system through which workers are exploited, there will be a community of free producers who will cooperate to produce goods and provide services solely and directly for needs. The community will have access to the pool of goods created free from the barriers of the market, without exchange of any kind and therefore without the use of money which is only necessary for making profit.

It is only by this means that we can sweep aside the economic straitjacket which constrains all social action under capitalism. To come back to the problem of eliminating acid emissions from power stations, the cost of £1 billion would not be a factor. That money barrier would disappear and through cooperation we would use the techniques which are available, apply our energies and get on with the job.

In socialism we would not be bound to use the most labour efficient methods of production. We would be free to select our methods in accordance with a wide range of socially desirable criteria, in particular the vital need to protect the environment. It wouldn't matter if ecologically benign methods of producing energy required more allocations of labour than destructive methods as we wouldn't be producing commodities which have to compete in price for sales in the market. We'd be free of all that.

The Green Party has talked about a "steady-state" society and this is something we should aim at. What it means is that we should construct permanent, durable means of production which you don't constantly innovate. We would use these to produce durable equipment and machinery and durable consumer goods designed to last for a long time, designed for minimum maintenance and made from materials which if necessary can be re-cycled. In this way we would get a minimum loss of materials; once they've been extracted and processed they can be used over and over again. It also means that once you've achieved satisfactory levels of consumer goods, you don't insist on producing more and more. Total social production could even be reduced. You achieve this "steady state" and you don't go on expanding production. This would be the opposite of cheap, shoddy, "throw-away" goods and built-in obsolescence, which results in a massive loss and destruction of resources.

This is something that socialism could do. The problem for the Green Party is that they want this, but they also want to retain the market system in which goods are distributed through sales at a profit and people's access to goods depends upon their incomes. The market, however, can only function with a constant pressure to renew its capacity for sales; and if it fails to do this production breaks down, people are out of employment and suffer a reduced income. It is a fundamental flaw and an insoluble contradiction in the Green Party argument that they want to retain the market system, which can only be sustained by continuous sales and continuous incomes, and at the same time they want a conservation society with reduced productive activity. These aims are totally incompatible with each other.

Old Failed Policies

The Green Party sees itself as a new force in politics but its basic approach to problems is years out of date. Like the Labour Party, it imagines it can do all sorts of things through the tax system. It says, for example, that it wants a tax system which will substantially redistribute wealth. The Labour Party tried that years ago and it failed, and the Green Party will fail for the same reasons.

Like the old Labour Party they imagine that by having the right kind of government in charge of capitalism they will be able to administer it in the interests of the whole community. The reason the Labour Party failed should be obvious. In its everyday operation capitalism staggers along according to its economic laws which cannot be controlled or rationally directed, on the basis of an economic antagonism between classes with capital trying to maximise its profits at the expense of wages and salaries and workers struggling to maximise wages at the expense of profits. It staggers along on the basis of competition and economic rivalries between enterprises and between capitalist nations.

Yet the Green Party thinks it can form a government which somehow, as if by magic, can ignore this reality and act on the basis of a common community interest through cooperation and socially responsible policies. This cannot be done. The tragedy is that we've got a lot of sincere and enthusiastic people in the Greens being sidetracked by these out-dated illusions which have dissipated so much energy and wasted so much time in the past.

The Green Party manifesto contains an elaborate battery of new taxes through which they hope to restructure society. Again, the old Labour Party manifestos contained similar proposals with the same intentions. The Labour Party abandoned them because they failed, but the Green Party has resurrected the corpses of these dead policies.

There's a community ground rent, a resource or conservation tax, pollution charges, increased consumption taxes, higher taxes on large firms, a new company turnover tax, and new trade taxes which would operate through import and export tariffs.

We can project a scenario for what would happen under a Green government. Imagine that it has passed a law standardising the production of all bottles and glass containers so they can be returned to food and drink producers to be used again. It's a sensible idea - socialism would do it - but this is a Green government under capitalism and it has put firms in the glass industry out of business and made a lot of workers unemployed. As a result of its trade tax on imports other government have retaliated and placed an embargo on the imports of British goods. This has put more firms out of business and more workers out of jobs. As a result of

higher company taxes on large firms there has been a sharp drop in business confidence with a corresponding reduction in investment. Again, this has made more workers unemployed. With less trade and less taxable income, there has been a sharp fall in funds flowing into the Green Exchequer. It has had to abandon its guaranteed income scheme and is facing widespread strikes in the public sector with vital services breaking down.

These depressed conditions have led to an alarming run on the pound, with the Green Chancellor frantically buying in sterling to keep up its value. Having dissipated government funds on this and other measures the Green government has been forced to abandon its plans to invest L1 billion to reduce acid emissions from power stations.

In other words, the Green government is facing mounting hostility from the trade unions, employers, the City and the international business community. It is in desperate straits struggling with a worsening financial crisis. They've had to set aside all their plans for dealing with the problems of the environment. Their poll ratings have hit zero, and they've fallen out amongst themselves arguing about what went wrong.

In the light of the economic realities of capitalism and the experience of previous reformist governments, which is the more likely scenario? The one being projected in the Green Party's sublimely optimistic literature or the one just outlined?

Urgent Need for Socialism

The obvious, and only practical, way forward is to get rid of the whole insane capitalist structure. This is the serious work begun by the socialist movement which has to be supported. One of the problems is that throughout this century we've had a lot of people who don't like the system and who want a better world, but they were diverted by the superficially attractive but fatal illusion that capitalism can be made to serve our needs through the right kind of reformist government.

In the meantime the problems have stayed and some have got worse. The Green Party is the first to stress that we don't have a lot of time, and it is certain that we cannot delay the solution without suffering the consequences. There can be no justification, on any grounds whatsoever, for wanting to retain an exploitative system which robs workers of the products of their labour, which puts privileged class interests and profit before the needs of the community, which robs the soil of its fertility, plunders nature of its resources and destroys the natural systems on which all our lives depend.

The only alternative is socialism. We must concentrate all our efforts on the work of building up a majority of socialists. It might seem a big job because our numbers are small, but we wouldn't need many more for us to become a strong voice in the community and every new socialist makes the work easier.

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