Ecology, Capitalism, Communism
by Jack Mundey

As the relatively small Communist Party of Australia prepares for its 25th Congress in June 1976, it is interesting to note that this Communist Party is one of the very few parties in the international communist, socialist, revolutionary movements which really believes there is a global ecological crisis, notes this, and at least tries, in a modest way, to advance some socialist ecological policies and possible solutions to the most urgent political problem of all time.

MARX AND HIS 19th CENTURY EXPOSE OF CAPITALISM

Socialists generally consider Marx's analysis of capitalism to be not only correct, but to be brilliant in its analysis in the 19th century. The basic tenets hold good 125 years later.

At the same time, many people question whether the USSR, which is now nearly 60 years old, and the People's Republic of China, born 27 years ago, have fulfilled the hopes, dreams and aspirations of millions of communists, socialists and their supporters throughout the world in advancing the general concepts enunciated by Marx and Engels, as well as other revolutionaries of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This main vision was for a humane society, in which genuine egalitarian values would be fought for, poverty and capitalism abolished, and the working people would be decisive in helping to fashion such a new socialist society, which would usher in a period in which the possibility existed for an all-round social, political and cultural development of human beings.

WHY HAS ECOLOGY BEEN NEGLECTED BY REVOLUTIONARIES?

It is true that many revolutionaries, in advancing a political viewpoint, often adopt a gospel like quotation mongering of Marx, Lenin, Engels, Mao Tse-tung (and even J.V. Stalin at a certain stage in history). Others quote Trotsky with equal fervor and religious-like dogmatism.

I contend that all strands of revolutionary thinking have been essentially economist in character, with a concentration on aiming to win control of the means of production, with insufficient consideration as to the ends of production, the social nature of labor, and almost total neglect of ecological consequences of the use of workers' labor, and of industrial development.

There has been a certain "plenitude" and "quantitative" mentality, with a minimum of
revolutionary theory and practice in examining the finite nature of the planet and its resources, a balance of population as well as consideration of other species, and a respect for all aspects of ecology and the future of this small planet on which we all live.

In discussing ecology prior to the 24th Congress, some in the CPA advanced that "within the ecology movement there is still a great need to combat liberal and reactionary ideas, that rely upon such myths as overpopulation, absolute shortage of resources, the 'necessity' of maintaining underdeveloped countries in backwardness, etc.". With them, I believe that the last "myth" is morally and politically wrong, but the previous statements fly in the face of reason and evidence. It is obvious that resources are finite; uncontrolled population is a tremendous problem which needs urgent and immediate attention. These problems are not mythical.

Too many revolutionaries speak of "conquering" nature, or or "using" nature, "harnessing" nature for man's benefit, arrogantly ignoring the need to harmonise with nature's delicate ecological balance. There has been a tendency to believe that a massive use of science and technology in a socialist framework would produce abundance for all, and solve all other problems.

Alas! How far from the truth - as cities, lakes, rivers, even seas and oceans have all been poisoned and pollution increases alarmingly.

Of course, science and technology both have a potentially positive role but only if such roles are seen in regard to the planet as a whole, for a global appreciation of the myriad problems.

Humanity is, for us, a very important part of the world, but it isn't the whole world. Other species and nature must be considered if humankind is to survive long in a civilised way, and the delicate balance between them must be maintained if humankind - possibly even organic life - is to survive at all.

THE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

This term was used over and over in the early post-war years, by communists, socialists and others, in expressing a hope that the profusion of goods which accompanied the idea of the "scientific and technological revolution" would dramatically alter the productive processes and humankind's control of nature's resources.

In the Fundamentals of Marxism Leninism, USSR scientist V.A. Obruchev in 1958 said:

"It is necessary; to prolong man's life to 150-200 years on the average, to wipe out infectious diseases, to reduce non-infectious diseases, to conquer old age and fatigue, to learn to restore life in the case of untimely, accidental death; to place at the service of man all the forces of nature, the energy of the sun, the wind and subterranean heat, to apply atomic energy in industry, transport and construction, to learn how to store energy and transmit without wires to any point; to predict and render completely harmless natural calamities; floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes; to produce in factories all substances unknown in nature: harder than diamonds, more heat resistant than fire-bricks, more refractory than tungsten and osmium, more flexible than silk and more elastic than rubber. To evoke new breeds of animals, and varieties of plants that grow more swiftly and yield more meat, milk, wool, grain, fibres and wood for man's needs; to reduce, adapt for the needs of life and conquer uncompromising area, marshes, mountains, deserts, taiga, tundra and perhaps even the sea's bottom; to learn to control the weather, regulate the wind, and heat, just as rivers are regulated now; to shift clouds at will, to arrange for rain or clear weather, snow or hot weather", etc.

Again, in the mid-sixties Civilisation at the Crossroads opened up the many perspectives of an industrialised society, and the potential for an industrialised society under socialism. Re-reading this book, one is struck again with the scant attention given to ecological problems. Again, there is a preoccupation with science, technology and economic growth.

THE WIDENING GAP

It is only in the last decade that there has been a growing popular awareness of the
serious ecological crisis and the need for a basic energy and resources policy on a global basis.

When one considers that China, in feeding and clothing close to 1,000 million, uses less total energy than the USA uses on air-conditioning alone, it gives some indication of the frightful imbalance in energy and resources usage.

The disparity in the consumption of food is similarly dramatic. For example, the USA and France together consume more food than China and India combined. And when one also considers the extent of poverty existing within the advanced industrialised countries, it makes the gap even wider in human reality.

250 million “westerners” consume the same quantity of protein as 1,500 million people in the Third World. Almost two-thirds of the world’s population is malnourished, and in the Third World, the distribution of income is even more polarised than in the advanced industrialised societies, as the rich elites tend to orient their consumption patterns to those of their counterparts in the advanced capitalist countries, consuming more and more foreign goods and requiring more and more expertise and technology.

Overall, the trade imbalance and financial inequalities between the two sectors - the advanced and Third World - and between rich and poor in the Third World is growing. Capitalist development inevitably produces development at one pole and underdevelopment at the other. The advanced capitalist countries and the underdeveloped countries are not separate worlds: they are the top and bottom sides of one and the same world.

THE ROLE OF THE MULTINATIONALS

Jon Tinker, in the New Scientist summarises the role of large companies in the mechanism that leads to the plight of the Third World countries in the following way:

“Since 1950 the trans-national corporations have steadily grown at a rate of two to three times faster than the most advanced industrial nations, at which rate they will, by the turn of the century, control over half the world’s goods and services. In particular, trans-national corporations dominate the world commodity markets, controlling both the extraction of raw materials and the end products made by them.

“Typically, a raw material is extracted by a trans-national in a developing country, and sold to the same trans-national in an industrialised country, where it is processed, manufactured and distributed.

“The highest grade ores have largely been extracted leaving the Third World without the cheap raw materials which historically provide economic take-off for Europe and North America.”

So the use of the power of the multinationals directly aggravates the worsening position of the Third World in just about every way.

IS A NEW ETHIC POSSIBLE?

It is possible only if a majority of people realise how late in the day it is and that humankind’s survival is on the agenda, that even the most sophisticated form of capitalism is incapable of effecting a sufficiently required change because of its intrinsic “economic growth” and “predatory expansionism” character.

SOCIALISM MUST BE DIFFERENT - AN ECOLOGICAL SOCIALISM!

Existing socialist societies and socialist ideologies generally must alter their present priorities, and more particularly, their values, if a sane, socialist, humane, ecological world is to come into being.

I contend that the “developing countries” are not “developing” and cannot do so in the present world system. Furthermore, the “developed countries” are on a suicide course that will, at least, destroy their way of life, and quite probably the whole of civilisation within the course of the next few decades - if there is not a fundamental change away from the destructive, acquisitive, consumerist societies which control the world and its resources now.

Although we may repeat that the present world crisis has been caused by capitalism (so far it has been the only significant influence) there is not much evidence to show that industrial socialism has contributed towards a suitable ecological solution.
WHY ARE SO FEW SOCIALISTS ECOLOGICALLY AWARE?

Did not Marx and the other socialist theoreticians say that poverty and scarcity were managed by capitalism? That the communist society would be one of abundance? Did they not attack Malthus and neo-Malthusians for suggesting that there was a limit on growth of population apart from those produced by capitalist exploitation. At that time maybe it was understandable. The total population of the world in Marx’s day was the same as China’s present day population. Three-quarters of the world was still almost virgin. North America, Australia and Siberia were only just opened up. Africa was still an unknown continent. Marx put his finger on the immediate restrictions: limitations caused by resource shortage and the finite extent of land, central to Malthus’ theory were problems for the distant future. In particular, it is only in the last 30 years that it has become possible to gauge the dimensions of the resources problem, as is now generally known and accepted.

Marx, however, was not completely oblivious of the restrictions of nature:

“The first premise of all human history, of course, is the existence of living human individuals. The first fact to be established then, is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relationship to the rest of the nature.”

Further, he stated:

“Communism as completed naturalism, is humanism, and, as completed humanism, naturalism. It is the genuine solution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man.”

It is quite understandable that Marx was less concerned with the relations between man and nature than those between man and man. This emphasis was inherent in the production of the works that remain an inspiration over a century later.

But the scientific character of the marxist method has, too often, been breached by later socialists. Marx once said (in exasperation) that he was not a marxist, a remark he would wish to repeat many times if he were alive today. It can hardly be doubted for example, that he would revise his opinions about some aspects of Malthus’ theory.

Although he might not reverse the priority of man-man over man-nature relations, he would certainly pay much more attention to the latter, and to their integration into the whole theory of his idea of scientific socialism. Such must be one of the major tasks of his followers in spirit rather than in the letter.

FINITE WORLD? - YES
INFINITE WORLD? - NO

In 1970, Paul Ehrlich brilliantly commented -

“To raise all the 3.6 billion people of the world to the American ‘standard of living’ would require .... 75 times as much iron as is now extracted annually, 100 times as much copper, 200 times as much lead, 75 times as much zinc and 250 times as much tin .... ”

Except for iron, such resources are just not available, and even if they were, world consumption of these and other metals would be 6-8 times the present value, so that the primary consumption would be enormous even if re-cycling occurred at a unrealistically high efficiency of 90 per cent. A further factor would, of course, need to be included to allow for the doubling of the world population, and of rich world per capita GNP by the year 2000, but we have already listed quite enough impossibilities to be going along with.

WHAT CHANCES - GLOBAL HARMONY?

The impossibility of a “USA type industrialised world” is abundantly clear. Nor, of course, is it desirable. However, many politicians of the Third World continue to try to follow this industrial “dream” to the detriment of future generations.

There must be a redistribution of real income - towards a national, then global equality.

Surely a prerequisite for global harmony must be abandonment of a false standard of living premise in favor of one of ‘quality of living’. We must move towards production for real needs, for genuine social and human needs and away from the production for profit, with the subsequent terrible desecration of the natural, rural and built environments, and the accumulation by capitalists (and workers
apeining capitalists) of consumerist commodities, many of which are completely unnecessary, purchased by people saturated by the incessant brainwashing of the vast, powerful advertising lobby which creates false wants, false values, false ethics, with all their inbuilt obsolescence and ecological destructiveness.

AGAINST "OVER"-INDUSTRIALISATION

The Third World countries should examine the danger signals from the most advanced "western" countries. Dr. Hammond of the US Cancer Society points out -

"Our world is changing rapidly, and the environment in which we live has altered to an extraordinary extent. The air we breathe contains gases and articles that never before entered the human lung. Chemicals in our food, ingest, inhale, absorb an ever increasing number of synthetic materials. Cancers which we are seeing now had their origin 15 to 30 years ago, and cancer agents being introduced into our environment now will not show their effect for another one or two decades .... There has been, and continues to be, no pre-testing materials for cancer or other serious diseases. Examination is for serviceability, sale ability, utility. Whether cancer will result is hardly considered."

THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF LABOR - DECISIVE

If industrial workers and their organisations can break with economism, and commence to question which commodities, goods and services should be made in the interests of society generally - yes, there is a future - but only if the progressive section of the populations of the advanced industrialised countries, with a socialist thrust, can give assistance to the Third World countries (not to mimic and blindly follow the present advanced industrialised countries) but instead to create a climate in which these countries can be truly independent to develop their economies in the manner in which each country wishes, but noting and avoiding the errors of the advanced industrialised countries and their tragic ecological record.

WORKERS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

The myth that the workers "have no right in" or "are not interested in" environmental issues is dangerous and wrong. In fact, the working class is the most affected section of the population when the environment is ravaged. Who lives in the most polluted areas of the world's huge cities? Who bears the heaviest noise levels? Who lives in the least congenial areas, etc.? The less endowed, of course,

Therefore, it is obvious that the workers' organisations must be concerned with more than the workplace, but must consider and link the transport, the home, the whole network of community and social pressures, all of which impinge on the total environmental life of workers and their families.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT - CONCERNED PEOPLE MUST ACT

If the Third World's people can learn from the errors of the industrial excesses, of an ecological destruction of the "advanced" countries, if there can be aroused a greater ecological consciousness amongst workers, in particular, and people generally, in the industrialised world, there may be some chance of avoiding the impending catastrophe.

Greed, predatory aggressiveness for personal and corporate profit and the ever-present possibility of nuclear war must be arrested and defeated.

A new ethic, with global concern and consideration for all human beings, other species and the whole environment could mean that humankind's entry into, and beyond, the 21st century could be assured.

A socialism, with a human, social and ecological heart, as well as a human face, is required. The history of the working people of the world, and of the whole 'left' oriented organisations as regards ecology, leaves a lot to be desired.

Possibly the present gravity of the ecological crisis is the reason that workers and their organisations are beginning to move. To the whole left, to socialists, to communists, in fact to all people, the world's survival is now on the political agenda and will remain there as long as humankind remains on our planet.