

Lesson 1: People and Planet Over Profit

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Personal Touch by Timotej and Maša

Why did you focus on this particular topic? Why do you find it important?

We believe it is crucial to understand the causes of issues in order to find best solutions for them. Only when we understand how our current system functions can we realize how it causes environmental crises, migration, exploitation of workers etc. It is a small attempt to try to articulate a scientific understanding of societal and environmental issues, that goes beyond blaming individuals as morally deficient and finding fault for their environmentally damaging actions, in short trying to give a wider view of social forces and tendencies that understand, that people don't always do what they do because of their individual agency, but because of wider societal forces.

For example if we think people don't use public transport as much because they simply don't like it or don't understand its benefits, our campaign would be based on raising awareness. But if we understand that public transport is inefficient and inaccessible (in a sense of money and place) we will focus on demanding from the government to improve it.



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What is the reason you think learners in this module should get familiar with the topic?

We think that learners should get familiar with this topic so that they get a better grasp of how our society operates, which can help them avoid spontaneous and ineffective approaches to solving the environmental crisis (moralism, individual change ...). We would hope that it would encourage them to think more critically of the environmental agenda of most movements, to criticize them, to inspire them to educate themselves more on the topic, and then join movements that approach the matter from a different perspective and have the capacity to produce real change in the long term.



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How do you think knowing what you wrote can contribute to change?

We think our chapter can contribute to change by showing the necessity for systemic change and the importance of building a big collective front of workers, environmental movement, progressive intellectuals and students. It also points to possible ways of building actual power, so instead of only raising awareness, we should focus on organizing people who can harm capital the most - workers. Another important point we would like to raise is that “knowing” things is not enough if it does not lead to action - this point can be clearly illustrated by the fact that we know about environmental problems for the last 50 years or so, and yet emissions keep rising every year. Change of consciousness, individual action and raising awareness are not enough without the change of material relations of production in our society.



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INTRO

It is widely agreed that we are on the brink of an environmental crisis of unseen proportions. According to The Guardian (Lu and Cox) Heatwaves kill around 5 million people per year and after an entire year of extreme drought in some parts of the world and thousand-year floods in others, we are living through the warmest November (2022) ever recorded in the country where a part of the team is set, Slovenia. And yet, "business as usual", oil keeps being pumped, coal keeps being burned and emissions keep rising. We are getting closer and closer to exceeding a 1.5-degree rise in average temperatures. In the backdrop of a new war (which is far from the worst and far from the only one going on right now) that shocked the western world, civil strife in much of the world, declining US hegemony, and new flows of migrations opening all over the world, the future indeed looks grim.



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Why is it so? Why are we drawn into conflicts at a time when we should cooperate to solve the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced? Why do emissions keep rising after so many conventions, climate summits, and protests? It would be too ambitious to claim that we will give a thorough answer in this short text, but we hope to at least sketch the picture to make it a bit clearer where the problem lies and point at the solutions.



1.1. We live in a society

We live in a society - a quote that carries different connotations and it was attributed to the Joker from the Batman series, even though until recently he never said it. Whatever we think of it we cannot deny this fact. Despite the fact that the ruling ideology, especially since the time of Margaret Thatcher, tries to convince us that only individuals and their families exist, it is demonstrably not so. Specifically, we live in a capitalist society, which is based on a capitalist mode of production. That means that a specific way that the economy is structured influences how society functions, how we think, how we see ourselves, how we understand the world, how we behave, and what we believe. And while we do have free will and can make choices, they are limited by our material circumstances and the ideologies that we are influenced by.



For example, even if I'm super educated on the topic of climate change and want to reduce my emissions by using public transport, but public transport in my country is very slow and ineffective, I don't have a choice but to drive a car to get to work to earn money to survive.



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1.2 Work, work, work - Rihanna, probably

*According to some scientists, common work was what proved decisive in the evolution of humans and our peculiar behavior compared to other animals. In any case, there is no denying that without people doing the work we wouldn't have plowed the plains and wouldn't build the cities, and achieved all the marvels of the modern world. We can therefore say that work, **labor**, is the basis, which turns nature into useful items. That means that to create anything useful we need resources, which are extracted from nature, and tools of any kind, which are also made by applying labor to natural resources with the use of tools. Land can also be tilled and worked upon to produce useful resources. To work people and machines need energy, which can take the form of calories, animal power, steam power, electricity, or other forms. Resources, tools, land, buildings, and other infrastructure necessary for production can be called the **means of production**.*



1.3. Classes and means of production

But means of production are not controlled democratically by the people. Even though means of production are crucial for the production of food, buildings, clothes, and everything we need to survive. Only a small number of individuals (they can be termed capitalists) are owners of means of production (factories, companies, land...) and are therefore controlling production and the economy. Those on the other hand who do not own the means of production are therefore forced to be employed and work for those who do own the means of production. In concrete terms, if you don't own a farm or a factory you need to go to work to earn money to buy products or services produced in factories, farms, and so on in order to survive. We term these people workers.



The latter are the ones who control production, decide how the workplace is organized, what to produce, where to sell the products to, and so on and workers are the ones who assemble the products or plow the field or serve you in a restaurant. Besides this, it often happens that the capitalists themselves do not actually control the production, but hire managers to do it for them. Managers are workers as well, but they behave in the interests of the capitalists and do the work for them.



1.4. Profit

It can happen that workers need to buy things that they produced themselves, but in a bizarre twist of fate, they usually do not get paid enough in time they need to produce a thing (let's say a burger) to actually buy it after it is done. In a fictional calculation, let's say that a worker in a restaurant assembles a burger in 5 minutes and it is sold for 5 euros. That means that 12 burgers are made in an hour, which is altogether sold for 60 euros. Let's assume that the ingredients for each burger cost 2 euros (24 euros for 12 burgers, which are made in an hour), and the worker who produces the burgers gets a generous hourly wage of 10 euros. That means that 34 euros are the expenses in one hour in which, as we stated earlier, there are 60 euros of income. That means there are 26 euros of pure profit per worker per hour.



Does the worker get the surplus value extracted from his labor? No, in capitalism it goes to the owner of the company, who uses the profit to replace old means of production (deep fryers, renovating the building, ...), pay for other workers (who do the cleaning, serving, managing, ...) and the leftover is reinvested in production, which means that the owner of our restaurant opens another one on the other side of the city - or as in the case of McDonald's, let's say, on the other side of the world. As of 2021, Mcdonald's owns 40 031 locations all over the world - compared to 31 046 owned in 2007, which means almost a 33% growth in the number of locations in the course of 14 years.



What we need to understand is that the growth in the number of restaurants also means the growth in the amount of energy being used, resources needed for the food and the buildings, and literal land needed for construction - which can also mean building over previously fertile soil or natural landscapes. Interestingly, the growth in the number of McDonald's restaurants has not led to the growth in the number of employees, it has actually led to it falling - in 2012 there were 440 000 employees in Mcdonald's worldwide, while there were only 200 000 in 2021. One of the reasons for this is the increased use of automation in the labor process which replaces workers. It leads to workers losing jobs, instead of reduced work time. This means that it is more profitable to replace workers with machines, instead of lowering the workload, shortening the working day, and keeping the same wage.



So we can see that automation is one of the ways of increasing profits, in some situations - we need to keep in mind that parts of the labor process will get automated if it is profitable. But as we have established in this section, only workers produce value, so a totally automated capitalist economy would not produce surplus value, meaning that it will not produce profit and therefore collapse. Others are making the workday longer, making work more intense, and faster, lowering wages, and deskilling (the process by which skilled labor within an industry or economy is eliminated by the introduction of technologies operated by semi- or unskilled workers). In business jargon, this is known as “optimization”, which usually carries negative consequences for workers, but increased profits for the owners. But to say that it is the greed of the capitalists that drives this crazy chase of profits is not true.



1.5. Growth for the sake of growth

But why does this happen? Why do companies need growth at every cost, even destroying workers' health and the environment? Is it because the owners are greedy? Many of them probably are, but individual moral failings cannot explain the social structure. Is it toxic masculinity that forces them to want to compete? Again, individual moral failings cannot account for social structure and this way of thinking does not explain where specific character traits come from. We need to dig deeper and examine the interactions that emerge when different private companies compete in a free market. The process of exploitation we described in the last chapter generates profits. When there are two (or more) companies in the same market niche they compete with each other for customers and profits, but most of all to sell all products they produce (if resources go unused - for example, if raw meat goes bad or if all burgers are not sold - their expenses are not covered).

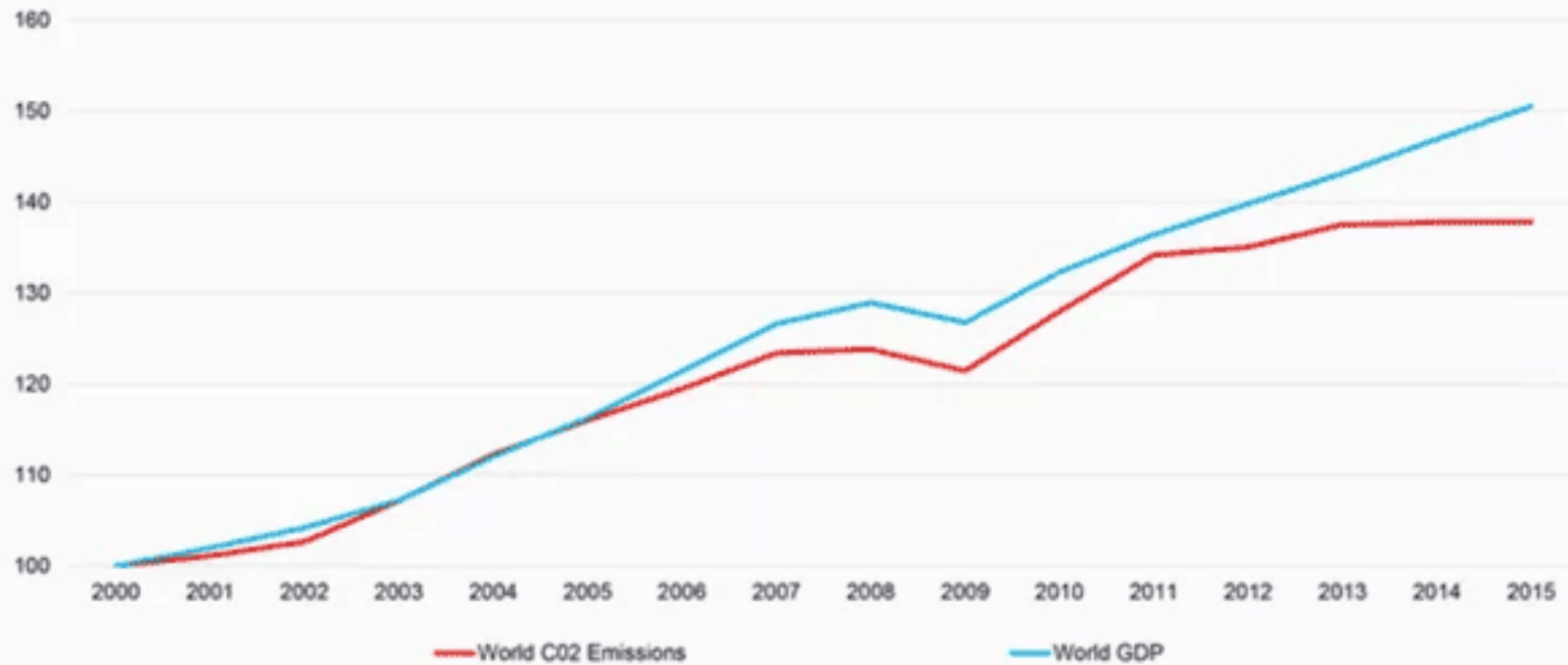


Through time both of these companies will try to make their products cheaper through technical innovations, more intense labor processes, lower wages, cheaper resources or energy sources, and so on. The one that is more successful in this will be more competitive in the market and will through time attract more customers and have larger profits, which will enable it to compete even better, while the other one will slowly become relatively less efficient, will not be able to cover its expenses and through time it will be swallowed up by the more profitable company or have to close down. We can conclude that competition between companies drives growth for the sake of growth. Growth of profits, which does not care for the consequences for workers and nature. It does not matter if the owner of the company is an old corrupt conservative white man or a virtuous queer woman of color. They both have to run their company, in the same way, to not go out of business, which leads to the catastrophic destruction of workers' lives and nature.



Figure 1. Global decoupling: Change in real GDP and CO₂ emissions since 2000

(Indexed to 100 in 2000)



Source: IEA, "Energy Related CO₂ Emissions" and International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2016

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1.6. The role of the state

The role of the state in a capitalist system is dual. On one side it regulates the market so it spares us the worst of its excesses concerning workers and environmental issues (note that majority of these regulations were fought for by the labor movement, the state did not implement them out of goodwill), though the regulatory role of the state has been decreasing in the last decades since the advent of neoliberalism. The same could be said about the democratic process - in recent years and especially since the Great Recession the emptiness of our so-called "democracy" has become more and more clear.



On the other side, it plays a repressive role and protects private property at all costs - which can be exemplified by repressive measures deployed against working people striking or rioting, while the banks get bailed out and the rich and powerful almost never get the punishment they deserve. We can conclude that the capitalist state mostly plays a role in protecting the system as it is, therefore we need to transfer the power of the state into the hands of the working class. It needs to be smashed and radically restructured, and democratized and the power needs to be torn out of the hands of the capitalist class one way or another.



1.7. Outsourcing

A typical process in the last decades, enabled by technological progress, is outsourcing. Usually, that means that capitalists from the countries of the imperial core (mostly the USA and western Europe) move their companies to other countries with lower workers and environmental standards, mostly peripheral countries of the global south. In this way, they can increase their profits at the expense of the environment and blood of third-world people and discipline the domestic working class. Because dirty industry gets moved far away it makes it seem that the post-industrial, richer countries become more environmentally friendly. A quick glance at where most of our products are made answers why it is like this, we export our dirty production to the global capitalist periphery, while we import the products made there. We might also add that repressive border regimes play a big role in keeping cheap labor in the third world.



1.8. Imperialism

With the concept of outsourcing, we can also connect the concept of imperialism. Imperialism can be defined as the use of non-economic means of states or economic institutions to achieve supremacy in international relations in order to enable the accumulation of capital. In other words, it means that states or companies use control over information or resource flows, patents, or military force to make sure that the growth of their profits goes on. The US invasions in the Middle East, coups in Latin America, and demonization of states which do not submit to the dictates of the US empire, followed by Europe and Japan, are some concrete ways this happens. Economic destruction, austerity, and conflicts brought upon by these (often illegal) move by the imperial core countries, combined with the effects of climate change, which are worse in the peripheral countries, lead to migrations.



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Imperialism could lead to further division of the core and the periphery, global-scale apartheid when the core would extract resources like lithium from the third world to use it to make its own green transition while leaving the third world to its own ends. As outlined so far, the environmental movement must be international and worker-based to be able to pressure states (or take state power) to make a just green transition. Only workers can force the state and companies to implement radical change - by striking, stopping work and pressuring it from below.



1.9. The fossil capital

*Andreas Malm established the theory of fossil capital in his book *The Fossil Capital, The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* written in 2016. There he demonstrates how the drive for profits and control over workers was what drove the move of early factories from water to coal as an energy source. Put shortly, building coal-powered factories in cities, instead of water-flow-powered factories in the countryside enabled capitalists to have access to huge pools of the workforce, which was unavailable in the countryside. Besides that steam-power is more stable and available regardless of time, season, and location, which enables capital to be more mobile. That laid the roots of self-sustaining growth based on the burning of fossil fuels, which we described in the previous sections.*



1.10. Planetary boundaries

Infinite economic growth is impossible on a planet with finite resources. This statement sounds logical and rational. But we live in a capitalist system that is based on constant growth and constant growth means a constant increase in used resources and produced waste.

Until 2015 we have exceeded 4 out of 9 planetary boundaries - climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, and biogeochemical flows. We are getting dangerously close to also exceeding freshwater use, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosol loading, stratospheric ozone depletion, and novel entities. Each of these aspects influences the others - exceeding one boundary can fasten exceeding another. For example, the effects of climate change cause faster loss of biodiversity.



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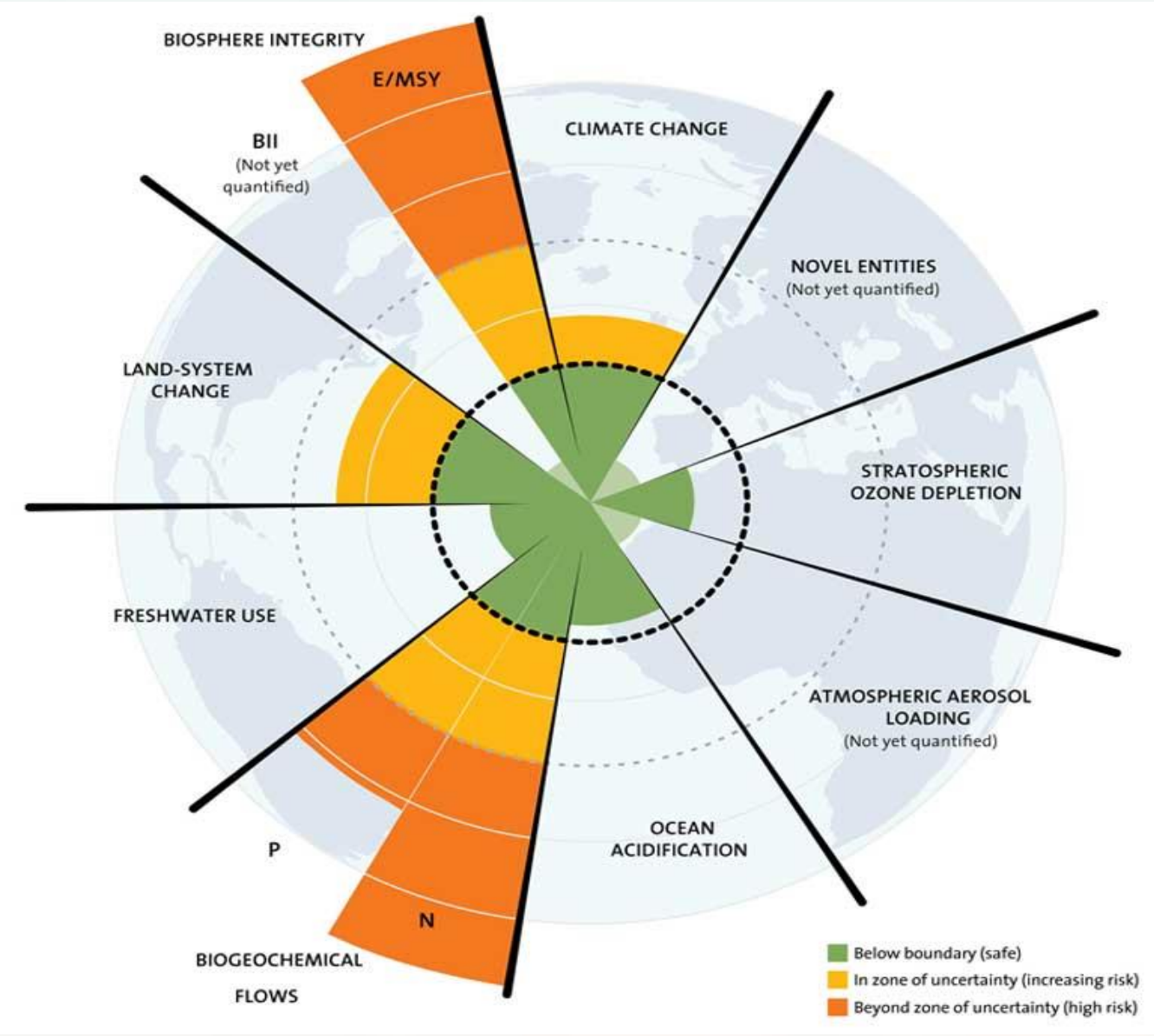
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Planetary boundaries



1.11. Planned obsolescence

As we demonstrated in earlier sections - profit is what drives production. That means that decisions are made, which are not necessarily rational and beneficial from environmental and social perspectives. One of them is planned obsolescence - in other words: products are intentionally made to break sooner than needed or are produced just for single use, like plastic containers. It is quite obvious why this is destructive for the environment and also why it leads to increased profits, continuously producing goods that are not made to last and need to be replaced in quick succession increases the demand and therefore seems like a logical business tactic.



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1.12 Recycling

Recycling is often presented as a way to individually do your part in saving the environment. What we need to be aware of is that recycling serves more as a legitimization of irrational production and shifting the responsibility to the individual level, instead of actually reducing the environmental impact of production and consumption. There are a multitude of reasons for that. For plastic specifically, not all types of plastic can be recycled successfully and effectively, and each type requires a specific procedure. If different types of plastic are deposited together it makes recycling way more difficult. Besides that plastic waste is often exported to peripheral countries, in the EU and global level, with worse environmental regulations where it is burned which is termed energy recovery in EU documents, a misleading name for yet another source of profits at the expense of the environment and society.



Besides that, a lot of plastic that is supposed to be recycled is deposited in oceans or natural environments. We can therefore conclude that the concept of recycling mostly serves as an ideological justification of profit-driven growth and shifts the responsibility of pollution to morally lacking consumers, instead of corporations and international inequality which are those who consciously constructed the narrative of individual responsibility.



1.13. Individual responsibility - and why it is not enough

Every day we are told that if we buy eco-friendly products, reduce our waste, recycle and do other things to lower our carbon footprint we will help the earth, and save the environment. Ironically carbon footprint was a concept created by British Petroleum - a company that has 18.700 gas and service stations worldwide and emits 340 million tonnes of CO2 per year. Fossil capital and other emitting companies want us, working people, to believe that we can influence production by simply buying different products e.g. if we consume more eco-friendly products we can stop climate change. But “voting with our dollars” has two problems. Firstly, not everyone has the same amount of “voting ballots”. And secondly, in reality, we aren’t really able to influence production by/via consumption. We see a lot more people trying to live sustainably, not eating meat, reducing waste, etc. and yet emissions are still rising.



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Our options when it comes to choosing more sustainably, are limited. If I want to use public transport to reduce my emissions, but it is very inaccessible, unaffordable, and inefficient, I can't use it if I want to arrive at my job on time. One individual can hardly do anything against institutions such as the market, the state, or companies. But it is in the interest of capital to make us believe that we can change something on an individual level. Because this passivizes us and gives us a feeling that we are already doing enough, already fixing the problem when in reality we are on our way to exceeding a 1.5-degree temperature rise. The real solution is for working people to organize and collectively demand radical change.



1.14. What is to be done?

After describing and explaining all of these urgent and global problems we are facing, we should also say something about how to act in order to create a better world.

As mentioned previously, workers are the ones who produce profit and capitalists primarily care about profits. Therefore if workers stop working they also stop producing profits which directly hurts companies. In this way, workers are able to demand radical change. We need to organize in our workplace and community and connect with environmental, pacifist and migrant organizations in order to create a collective front.



More concretely, we should join trade unions, student movements, and environmental movements, organize strikes, and protests and spread our ideas. Only when popular classes (workers, small farmers, students, unemployed, etc.) join forces, change is possible. We need to build real political power with which we can take control over how our economy is run, so the production will be focused on fulfilling the actual needs of the people and the planet, instead of for profits and growth.



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