

Energy Transition

Towards Degrowth and the Democratization of Key Means of Production and Reproduction

A far-reaching energy transition requires the construction of new social relations of production and consumption. This is likely to entail a longterm, and uncertain, process of social struggle for control of society's productive capacities, especially in energy-intensive sectors.

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The kind of massive and rapid reductions in CO₂ emissions (and the corresponding changes in the system of energy production and consumption, which are necessary for this to occur) will not be possible without very far-reaching changes in production and consumption relations at a more general level. However, dominant approaches to climate change limit their focus to promoting regulatory reforms. This is true for governments, multilateral institutions and also large sectors of so-called "civil society" (especially the major national and international trade unions and their federations, and NGOs).

The stark reality is that the only two recent periods which have seen a major reduction in global CO₂ emissions have coincided with periods of very sudden, rapid, socially disruptive and painful periods of forced economic degrowth: namely the breakdown of the Soviet bloc, and during the current financial-economic crisis. In May 2009, the International Energy Agency reported that, for the first time since 1945, global demand for electricity was expected to fall. Experience has shown that a lot of time and political energy have been wasted on developing a highly ineffective regulatory framework. Years of international climate negotiations, the institutional basis for global regulatory efforts, have simply proven to be hot air. Unsurprisingly, hot air has resulted in global warming. Only unintended degrowth has had the effect that years of intentional regulations sought to achieve. Regulatory efforts will certainly be pursued, and furthermore, they may well contribute to shoring up legitimacy, at least for a time, especially in Northern countries where the effects of climate changes are less immediately visible and impacting. Nonetheless, in the run

up to the massive media spectacle that Copenhagen COP 15 looks set to be, it is becoming increasingly clear that solutions will not be found at this level.

The problem is one of production

The current world-wide system of production is based on endless growth and expansion. The system cannot exist if it fails to grow. This is not a matter of ethics, but of structural social relations. However, such a growth based system is simply incompatible with a long-term reduction in emissions and energy consumption. Despite the fact that localised, and momentary, reductions may well actually occur, the energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions of the system as a whole, and in the long run, can only increase. All the energy-efficiency technologies in the world, though undoubtedly crucial to any long term solution, cannot, on their own, square the circle by reducing total emissions from a system whose survival is based on continuous expansion. Rather, by reducing per unit costs and energy requirements, energy efficiency measures actually tend to increase energy consumption within the system as a whole.

Stressing the importance of production is not to say regulation is unimportant. It is completely essential. However, the regulatory process is unlikely to be the driving force behind the changes required. Leadership in an emancipatory transition process is unlikely to come predominantly from above from international regulatory fora, but is more likely to come from autonomous movements self-organising from below in order to gain greater control and autonomy over energy production and consumption. As such, rather than being the driving force, regulation is a necessary facilitation process to secure a legal and institutional framework (as well as financial support) conducive to such a grassroots process led from below. An appropriate regulatory framework may enable wider changes to occur, and to deepen it once it is already underway. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that emancipatory regulation that is strong enough to be effective could even come about without

major pressure from below, far greater than currently exists.

The need to construct new relations of production

Leaving the necessary changes in the social relations of production and consumption (of energy, and more generally) to the logic of accumulation of profit in the world-market is likely to both be far too slow, given the urgency of the climate crisis, and also immensely socially disruptive. And, given the abovementioned effectiveness of unplanned “degrowth” in reducing emissions, relative to international negotiations, an urgent question facing emancipatory social and ecological struggles is how to collectively and democratically construct a process of planned rapid and broad degrowth, based around collective political control and democratic and participatory decision making over production, consumption and exchange.

“Peak oil” starkly poses the question of how to collectively manage scarcity in a fair manner in order to avert extremely destructive power struggles that exacerbate already existing inequalities (especially in relation to class, race, gender and age). It will also be crucial to seek to avoid the forced imposition of austerity measures on people. Solutions that do not actively strive to avoid pitting different workers, both waged and unwaged, in different regions of the world against one another, are almost certain to result in a transition being carried out on the back of these workers and their communities. The failure of emancipatory movements to force capital to pay the burden, would, in all likelihood, prove immensely divisive and destructive. Of particular importance in relation to building a new energy system are the key means for generating society’s wealth and human subsistence. These include: land, seeds, water, energy, factories, universities, schools, communication infrastructures etc. Especially significant in this context are the major energy intensive industries, such as transport, steel, automobiles, petrochemicals, mining, construction, the export sector in general, and industrialised agriculture.

However, it is very difficult to imagine that it will be possible to bring about a rapid and far-reaching process of collectively-planned emancipatory change, at the pace and scale which is necessary, unless these key means of generating and distributing wealth and subsistence are under some

form of common, collective, participatory and democratic control, decision making and ownership. Furthermore, it is crucial to make sure that they are used to meet the basic needs of all the world’s population, rather than the profit needs of the world-market and the select few workers and communities who are able to reap the benefits of this. In other words, there is an urgent need to decommodify these sources of wealth as much and as fast as possible. However, following years of market-led reforms, and an unprecedented concentra-

tion of wealth and power, we are still very far from this reality. This is true both in concrete terms and also in terms of our collective aspirations and strategic approaches. Dominant political strategies for achieving change are entrenched in seeking minor regulatory reforms (at best including state ownership) rather than a more fundamental shift in power relations pertaining to structures of ownership and control.

Consequently, an urgent task for the years ahead is to discuss what kind of short-term



interventions might help to make such a political agenda more realistically achievable in the near and medium term future. It is not a new discussion. In the past, collective ownership, management and control of key means of production (either in the form of worker, community, cooperative or state) have been at the heart of most left-leaning proposals for social struggles. Furthermore, emancipatory left-wing critiques of state communism, socialism, social democracy and their respective bureaucracies have not been based on a rejection of collective ownership of key means of production. Instead, they were based on a strong critique of the fundamentally limited nature of state ownership as being a model for democratic, participatory and self-organised social change from below – on an understanding, in other words, that state control is in some ways simply a modified form of private ownership and capitalist class relations.

Crisis as an opportunity for reorienting our struggles

The economic-financial crisis offers an opportunity to reopen this old discussion, since the old model of Keynesian class compromise and stabilisation of struggles aimed at changing ownership patterns of key means of production is dead, and in all

probability will not be resurrected. Furthermore, unless the discussion on production is reopened, it is very likely that the “solutions” found to the economic-financial crisis will be authoritarian.

Starting with the economic and financial collapse of Argentina in 2001, factory occupations and self-managed industrial production and exchange have returned to the political landscape. In the wake of the current worldwide financial and economic crisis, a ripple of factory struggles, including worker occupations and kidnapping of bosses, have spread around the world, including in the U. S., the UK, and numerous countries in Eastern Europe. Such struggles are largely defensive, related to redundancy conditions, rather than proposing a new model of ownership, production and control, and are still on a very small scale. Notably, the Detroit car factories have virtually been left to go under, or given lifelines in order to draw out their demise over time. Certainly they have not been taken over by workers and communities and converted into renewable energy production plants. Yet, even the head of the United Autoworkers Union made a fleeting and cautious reference to workers’ occupations of the plants, albeit way too little, way too late. Yet, this is a rhetoric that has not been used in such places for many

decades. In South Korea, workers in the car industry have recently sustained an occupation of a car factory that lasted over two months, involved close to 1.000 workers, and armed self-defence. It was only defeated after a prolonged struggle involved several thousand riot police. For the most part, with the exception of the Korean car plants, these have been small processes. Nonetheless, they are of great importance, and appear to be on the upsurge. Importantly, the industries in crisis are some of the key energy-intensive industries, such as cars and steel, which are especially relevant to the issue of energy transition and worker-community led conversion processes.

The stark reality is that we are very far from bringing about the kind of change in production and consumption relations that is needed to solve the climate/energy crisis. We may in fact never be in a position to do so. However, if we are to have any chance of avoiding a socially and ecologically disastrous process of climate change and enforced change in social relations, it will be important to at least pose the question of how this might come about. Until we face up to this, efforts to tackle climate change will go nowhere. The task of collectively taking over the key means of production and reproduction, and decommodifying the major productive processes are immense. We are certainly not yet ready. However, what is both possible and long overdue is to at least take some initial steps towards deepening a long-term strategic debate about how, and for what purposes, wealth is produced and distributed in society, and how people’s subsistence needs are met, as part of a shift to a new energy system.

Through a process of debate, we will hopefully be able to slowly develop collective interventions which contribute to these goals, so that in the medium term, as the economic-financial and ecological crises deepen, we might then be able to do what is not possible now, and collectively plan the process of production and consumption, based on a clear process of class struggle that bring together workers (both waged and unwaged), communities and users of energy and energy intensive sectors, across the hierarchically divided world-wide division of labour. This will already be an important step towards bringing about a profound democratisation of how wealth is produced and distributed throughout society. ■

