

# **A Note on Global Warming Workshop on 16 December 2008**

## **What is global warming?**

For over four thousand millions of years, the Sun's energy has nourished the Earth, generating and sustaining all plant and animal life on it. A part of that energy is reflected and radiated back by the Earth's surface into space, maintaining a natural balance and preventing overheating of the earth. That balance has been undermined by human activity, mainly since the Industrial Revolution 250 years ago.

With the Industrial Revolution, there started an accelerated use of energy through the burning of fossil fuels. This consumption of coal, and later, petrol, diesel, and natural gas, and other human activities such as mining, and deforestation generate carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane, and other greenhouse gases. These gases trap the heat radiated by earth and prevent it from going back into space, leading to additional warming of the Earth. This essentially is the cause of global warming.

At its core, global warming is caused by unequal rights and unequal access that people across the world have to global resources of land, water and air. With increasing privatisation of these common resources (*global commons*), it becomes more and more difficult to find answers to collective problems that demand collective solutions.

## **How does global warming affect us?**

Global warming affects different people in different ways.

It has already changed climate including rainfall patterns in many regions, which will intensify and spread. This has huge impact on agriculture and cropping patterns, much of which is dependent on predictable rains and river flows. It is expected that with global warming intensifying, large tracts of land in the tropical region will face desertification. Poor regions, particularly Africa and South Asia, appear at greatest threat from projected affects of global warming. Falling agricultural produce will mean a greater risk of famine in the most affected parts, and increases in food grain prices across the world.

As a consequence of a warmer Earth, snow has been melting the world over. It is now widely believed that Arctic regions will in a few years be free of ice during the summer months. Glaciers in most mountain regions, including in the Himalayas, are receding rapidly. Less snow and Arctic ice means more absorption of sunlight and heat, leading to further warming. The disappearance of snow caps and receding glaciers will mean that perennial rivers, including the Ganga, will dry up for many months of the year. This will affect millions of people living in cities and villages along their banks. This melting will also contribute to rising sea levels, putting crores of people who live in coastal communities at great danger of submergence. The number of people who will face forced displacement will be massive. Another adverse impact of global warming on a large section of these communities is on their livelihoods. Already affected by falling fish reserves because of indiscriminate mechanised fishing, they will be further impacted by falling fish stocks because of rising sea temperature.

The access to both drinking and irrigation water will be severely affected because of declining rainfall in many areas and rivers drying up. Ordinary people across the world, whether in cities, small towns, or villages, will be affected by falling agricultural production and by increasing prices

of agricultural products. We have already seen unchecked price increases in the past few years. At the same time, increased rains in shorter time periods in some places will lead to floods. Diseases and health related problems will also spread more. Many of these impacts have already begun and are visible.

### **Is capitalism the source of global warming?**

Capitalism involves two forms of exploitation. One, the unchecked exploitation of natural resources in the name of economic growth. And two, the creation of unprecedented differences in consumption between the rich and the poor with the rich having unsustainable lifestyles and the poor being forced to underconsume. Capitalism also involves the spread of globalized markets, which are unprecedented in scale and speed. Modern warfare, and the 'defense' enterprises that underlie it, so dependent upon planes, fuels and minerals, is also qualitatively different from earlier eras. All these are central to causing global warming.

Over the last century, total energy consumption across the world increased twenty times. This increased energy consumption continues unabated. Present global emissions from the burning of coal, oil and gas is about 25% more than in 1990. This period of global warming is also a period of growing global energy crisis. While on the one hand, energy consumption has been skyrocketing, on the other hand reserves of petroleum and natural gas are declining. We have already seen one major war in Iraq on the issue of control of oil reserves. Many more such wars can be expected if the present situation is allowed to continue.

Today the per capita energy consumption in an economically and technologically developed country like the USA is 6 times that in a developing country like China, and sixteen times that in India. In neighbouring Bangladesh, per capita energy consumption is only a third of that in India. And we have already reached a planetary crisis, while a majority of the populations in India, Bangladesh, China, Africa and elsewhere cannot even meet their everyday, basic needs.

This is still not the complete picture. There are huge differences in consumption patterns within countries. In India, the richest 10 per cent consume about ten times (let us recheck this figure) that of the poorest 10 per cent. The energy consumption differences will also be roughly in the same ratio. We see therefore that it is the poor who have to pay for the excessive consumption of the rich. A consumption that at the highest levels has been rising at an obscene pace, with now, even private space travel available to the super rich, whereas most workers in this country are forced to underconsume.

### **Is global warming an emergency?**

The fact of global warming being a crisis has universal acceptance and is recognised by countries across the world. The Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations has 186 countries as signatories, committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, in order to combat global warming. However, the US, the worst emitter, has stayed out of the Kyoto Protocol. Two, the emissions targets under Kyoto are too feeble, merely 5.2%. Three, the seriousness of the countries in actually implementing policies towards these commitments can be questioned; emissions since 1990 (the cut-off date under Kyoto) have actually risen rather than declined, from 21 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> in 1990 to 28 billion tonnes in 2005. Four, the Kyoto Protocol has encouraged the creation of carbon markets which avoids the reductions necessary in First World countries. What carbon trading does is in fact to shift the burden of reducing carbon emissions from the rich to the poor countries, often displacing the poorest communities in poor countries from common lands that had been the traditional source of their livelihood.

The dire urgency of the situation stems from the fact that we are fast approaching a point from where it would be impossible to reverse global warming. Time periods of 7-20 years are projected as the grace period, after which more warming and further damage to the Earth will become unavoidable.

### **What has been the Indian Government's response?**

The Indian government has been saying that USA and other First World countries are mainly responsible for global warming, and that per capita emissions should be the basis for a global framework of reduction. This is essentially correct, but for it to be consistent, logically and morally, it must extend this to within, as well as across, countries. We must acknowledge the right of every human being to the *global commons* in a fair and equitable way, with compensation for damage inflicted in the past and present.

There are two other *very* serious linked inadequacies in the response. First, the fact that India has a very large proportion of the global poor and significant proportion of its population lives on or near the coast. They would be devastated irrespective of *who* was causing the damage. Second, since ecosystems do not respect any national boundaries, it is of greatest importance to use a multi-lateral framework to work out a drastic reduction of emissions *extremely* quickly.

### **What should be the stand of trade unions in this context?**

We see universally that it is the poor who bear the brunt of any crisis. We see this happening today, in the face of the biggest economic crisis the world has faced. The reason for the economic crisis was uncontrolled freedom to capital to operate the way it wanted. The global warming crisis is closely linked to the same crisis of unfettered freedom to capital. The first demand of the working class has to be for regulation of capital.

The basis for the crisis of capital is also its inherent greed. A greed that permitted colossal accumulation of wealth, while half the world lives in poverty. The second demand of working people everywhere therefore has to be for greater equity in distribution of wealth and consumption.

Greater equity means that the access of the poor to greater consumption has to improve, while the rich curtail their consumption of the world's resources. It is the rich sections of society in each country, including in India, whose consumption needs to be regulated most. It has to be the rich countries that take on the primary responsibility and pay for the damages of reckless capitalism.

Greater equity also means going back to the principle of public ownership of enterprises that governed India up till the eighties. Public ownership should include public transport, public health care, public distribution of commodities – all of which can lead to significant savings in energy consumption. In that spirit, we support all struggles against the privatisation of public enterprises, and for reasserting people's rights over the *global commons* such as of land, water and forests.

The demand for "green" technology has to gain political support. Green sources of energy, whether solar, wind power, geothermal energy or any other such source, have to get large government support. The present token support given will not serve any purpose.

Any restructuring of capital comes at a cost to the working class. The primary cost would be job losses to allow for development with lower energy consumption growth rates. The demand has to be for government support to compensate for losses to the working class. We also need to push for a decentralized application of green technologies – such as windmills, solar applications, etc in every village – which would both meet local needs better and create jobs on a large scale.

Agriculture has to be supported to make it viable, while affording agricultural workers a living wage. Creative use of policies like the NREGA has to be directed to this end. NREGA can be used, for example, to promote soil regeneration, watershed development, and good quality forest cover in places where forests have been degraded by industry. Can the control of the local commons be returned to indigenous people, rather than being traded for carbon credits?

There has to be an unequivocal opposition to war. War is the primary cause of human misery. The industry around war has the least redistributive impact, and serves no public good.

Finally, trade unions and workers' organisations have a vital role to play in any political effort at combating climate change. No government programmes can be effective without the participation of the involved stakeholders. In any programme for equity, workers are the primary stakeholders. Trade unions have to be present, to represent workers' democratic interests, and ensure monitoring of the programmes.

*Summing up:*

Today, there is growing global awareness of the risk to the survival of human society caused by global warming. This is a risk faced by all, whether rich or poor, from developed, developing or underdeveloped countries. But as is the nature with all such crises, this crisis will also affect first, and most acutely, the poorest communities and people of the world. This is therefore first and foremost a crisis of the working people. Working class organisations will therefore have to take up the struggle against global warming, and decisively. Workers will need to take up the struggle at the individual and local level, in pushing for community action to reduce inefficient and wasteful consumption. They need to take up the struggle in solidarity with local communities fighting displacement, as a common struggle against global warming. They need to question politically a global ideology that talks of unlimited and unregulated freedom to capital to exploit people and resources. They have to forge and lead an alliance of common people at the local, regional, national and international level, that forces governments to re-examine present development models and reshape society more equitably. This is a struggle against capital that allows trade unions to build alliances with different diverse struggles for social and economic justice across the world.

**Comments on the note and suggestions for strategies may be sent to the NTUI at [ntui@vsnl.net](mailto:ntui@vsnl.net) or to the NFFPFW at [nffpfwindia@gmail.com](mailto:nffpfwindia@gmail.com)**

**Delhi Platform ? Kerala Swantantra Matsya Thozhilalargal Forum ?  
? National Forum of Forest People & Forest Workers ? New Trade Union Initiative ?**