SEARCH’s recent Environmental Justice forums, held in November 2015 and August 2016, were aimed at drawing on just some of the enormous wealth of knowledge and experience that SEARCH members have in struggles spanning generations, including some iconic environmental justice struggles.

These struggles, including the Green Bans, anti-nuclear movements, fighting against dams and to protect forests, for proper urban planning, for safe and secure food, water and housing, and for public health and decent livelihoods for all, inspired many of us to join the progressive, socialist and communist movement - and continue to inspire us today.

These SEARCH forums and Environmental Justice bulletin focus on current challenges about environmental and climate justice, and what we can learn from some successful recent campaigns about building powerful social movements that win. Some articles discuss strategies and solidarity partnerships needed to drive transition to a climate-safe and democratic energy future. Others discuss some of the big picture challenges around human-nature relationships in an era now being referred by some as the Anthropocene (the Age of Humans) and how awareness of the disproportionate impacts humans are having on planetary evolution might influence struggles for justice and the survival of humans and other species.

This bulletin includes contributions from SEARCH members and other environmental and social justice campaigners we work with in community, labour movement, indigenous, academic, environment and social justice organisations. We are very pleased that there is a diverse range of contributors from organisations leading progressive social change in Australia including Lock the Gate, Friends of the Earth, Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) and SEED, Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN), CFMEU Mining & Energy Division, Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, as well as from other workplaces and community organisations.

The bulletin is timely as we deal with unprecedented ecological, social, economic and political disfunction in human societies, and as we struggle for a better world together with millions of people around the world whose safety and wellbeing is threatened by environmental collapse, and repression, violence, war and displacement from homes, which is often linked to environmental causes. Climate change threatens billions of people and the survival of many species of life and ecosystems that humans depend on for survival, and which also have inherent value in their own right.

Yet, there is cause for optimism as well as alarm. As acclaimed Indian author Arundhati Roy said: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.” - Arundhati Roy (2003) War Talk, South End Press, Boston, MA.

As a hub and network for fostering ideas, policies, strategies and actions to create sustainable, just and democratic alternatives to capitalism, the SEARCH Environmental Justice working group, invites you to read the articles in the bulletin. We hope you find them thought provoking and that they might encourage you to get involved with us. If you have any questions, suggestion, contributions or offers to help produce the next bulletin you can contact us.

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by Geoff Evans

The right to a healthy environment is a basic human right, and political struggle is crucial to achieving human rights. This article is based on a presentation I gave at the first SEARCH Environmental Justice forum, which focused on what a democratic socialist economy might look like and how we might transition to a genuinely fair, just and ecologically sustainable future for all people – and for a liveable planet.

A climate emergency now threatens the survival of many millions of people and many of the marine and terrestrial ecosystems on which we depend for our wellbeing. Loss of ecological and social sustainability caused by over-exploitation of the limited natural resources of a finite planet is exacerbated by the gross inequity in the distribution of wealth and loss of genuine participation and democratic and human rights.

It is clear that powerful political struggles for transformational change needed to deal with climate change and other major global crisis humanity faces. In the face of government inaction, social or people’s movements linked globally across the North/South divide and across sectors are developing new approaches to organising and mobilising communities.

Environmental justice - roots in challenging racism and class exploitation

The environmental justice concept is an evolving and inclusive notion of justice that that emerged as a frame for environmental campaigning in the US in the early 1980s from struggles in the African American and Native American communities to stop the harmful health impacts of landfill, mines, nuclear waste dumps, freeways, toxic chemical incinerators and other hazardous developments. These developments threaten public health, livelihoods and wellbeing, and are disproportionately located in or near poor and coloured communities. The movement highlights the links between environment, development, class, race and other systemic oppression manifested as the inequitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits, and lack of fair and meaningful participation of affected communities in decision-making about development that affects their environments and their well-being. The environmental justice movement’s scope extends to recognising and protecting community ways of life, local knowledge, and cultural differences. Environmental justice activists demand accountability of governments, industry and non-government organisations, and also of community service and environmental organisations that ought to represent disadvantaged people’s interests but often fail to effectively do so.

Environmental justice is not the “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) ideology where some communities simply advocate shifting hazardous industries from one locality to another. While the environmental justice concept has more commonly been focused on justice among humans on environmental issues the concept has sometimes been linked to campaigns for justice toward the natural world and all species and ecosystems – a concept also referred to as ecological justice (see Dobson 1998; Low and Gleeson 1998; Schlosberg, 2001).

Climate justice shares the environmental justice focus on the systemic causes, and the differential, inequitable and unjust impacts of environmental change, but with a particular focus on climate change. (See Bullard, 1983, 1994, 2005; Camacho, 1998; Schrader-Frechette, 2002; Agyeman et al., 2003; Schlosberg, 2004, 2007, 2013; Baer and Burgmann, 2012; Schlosberg and Collins, 2014 for more discussion of these concepts).

There are many examples of environmental injustice globally, including in Australia beginning from the original genocide and dispossession of Aboriginal people of their land and the subsequent degradation of landscapes that had been maintained in a healthy state by the world’s longest continuing cultures for agriculture and other ‘development’. Other environmental injustices perpetrated on Aboriginal communities and their lands include the testing of nuclear weapons tests in the 1960s on Pitjantjatjara lands of Central Australia, and more recently proposals to locate nuclear waste dumps on Aboriginal lands at Muckaty near Tennant Creek in Central Australia (successfully beaten back) and now new proposals for a nuclear waste dump in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia.

Environmental justice struggles are also mobilising other communities across Australia. Opposition is growing to the environmental harm and human health impacts of destructive mining, including coal and gas mining and export in the Hunter and Liverpool Plains in NSW, in the Latrobe in Victoria, Central Queensland and elsewhere. Struggles over urban planning and transport policy that harms public health and city liveability, and favours private cars and investment away from decent public transport for working class families living in under-serviced urban sprawl suburbs at the fringes of cities, is driving the campaigns against West Connex in Sydney and Eastern Distributor in Melbourne.

Around the world it is people who have made the least historic contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, and who have benefited least from fossil fuel driven industrialisation, that are most vulnerable to climate change threats to their food, shelter, livelihoods and safety. Increasingly frequent and severe cyclones are hitting poor communities in the Philippines, Vanuatu and Fiji. Poor families are more likely to be living in sub-standard housing in flood-prone and bushfire-prone areas, and in low-quality housing without adequate protection for severe storms, heat waves and other climate-linked natural disasters. Climate justice campaigns target removing the underlying causes of climate change, and for the financial, technical resources and political support to enable vulnerable communities to manage climate change threats.

People being displaced from their traditional homelands lead the global struggle for climate justice. Activists from Pacific nations such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and Papua New Guinea, who organised as ‘Pacific Climate under the slogan “We are not drowning, we are fighting!’ and recently led militant non-violent protest actions in Newcastle and elsewhere in Australia.
Pacific Island leaders led the call at the Paris Climate Change negotiations in 2015 for action to ensure a maximum average rise in global temperatures of 1.5 degrees Celsius. These grassroots and global governance-system focused environmental and climate justice campaigns directly challenge the power and privilege of the wealthy and powerful elites, and demand an end the burning of fossil fuels, for funding of adaptation strategies to protect the homes, health, livelihoods and safety of the most vulnerable low income communities (e.g. through investment in climate-resilient housing, services and other infrastructure and transfer of clean energy technology); and for the wealthy nations to take global responsibility and compensate for harm done.

Thousands of local environmental and climate justice struggles, powerful global alliances, and strategic campaigning (including those discussed in this bulletin) build the momentum for transforming systemic injustice towards democratic, equitable and ecologically sustainable futures for people, with ecological space for other species to also thrive.

Planetary limits and human development

Environmental justice campaigns to extend care and responsibility, equity, participation and accountability include recognising human impact on the planet’s finite resources and challenging how the economic system is affecting the just distribution of these resources, and how inequitable distribution threatens the wellbeing of current and future generations.

a) Living within one planet

Human societies are embedded in ecological systems and a planet with finite resources. The ‘ecological footprint’ is one way of measuring the impact of humans on the planet. It measures the sum of the area of cropland, grazing land, forest and fishing grounds required to produce the food, fibre and timber consumed, to absorb the wastes emitted from energy generation, and to provide space for infrastructure. The footprint includes the raw materials mined, grown, logged, manufactured, packaged, transported, used and discarded in globalised industrial production systems. It includes carbon emissions, such as emissions from air flights across the planet taken for holidays and work, materials consumed in new buildings, cars, foods and consumer goods churning through economies as populations grow and new trends and technologies emerge and the old becomes redundant, and so on.

The World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) Living Planet Report 2014 found that in 2010, the total global ecological footprint of humans was 18.1 billion global hectares (gha). This means that the Earth’s people needed 18 billion hectares of productive land in order to provide each and every person with the resources to support their lifestyle and to absorb the wastes they produced. With a global population of around 7 billion this was equivalent of 2.6 gha per capita. However, the Earth’s total biocapacity was 12 billion gha, or 1.7 gha per capita, meaning that in 2010 we had overshot the planet’s carrying capacity by 50%.

Not only is there an issue of total load on the planet, but one of equity and ‘per capita rights’ to the global biosphere, including the global atmosphere. Australians have one of the largest environmental footprints per capita in the world, requiring 6.25 global hectares per person. As a nation, we’re consuming more than three times our fair share of the planet’s natural resources. There is also gross inequity within Australia, but if the rest of the world consumed the Australian ‘average’ footprint, we would need the regenerative capacity of 3.7 Earths to sustain our demands on nature.

While the ecological footprint is a handy tool it does not fully take into account the impact of our economy on the wider world. It does not, for example, capture the global impact of Australia’s dependency on coal exports that create wealth here but contributes to climate impacts on countries of the Pacific and elsewhere.

Capitalist economies, and arguably the state ‘socialist’ economies of the former Soviet Union and China, are dependent on growth for their stability. Far from guaranteeing human quality of life...
through access to housing, health care, education, livelihoods and care, growth addiction exhausts resources for current and future generations. The collapse of global fisheries from over-exploitation is just one example. Unbridled natural resource extraction, globalization of production in unfettered markets, and the unsustainable consumerist values of the wealthy have created a parasitic relationship between humans and ecology at the cost of justice, equity and sustainability. We only have one Earth, not four!

b) Human development rights for all

Along with the ecological impact of humanity inequitable ecological burden on the planet there is also the question of the purpose and equitable outcomes of economic activity. The ‘Human Development Index’ (HDI) is a composite measure of life expectancy, education, and income per capita. It is an indicator of wellbeing used by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and one means of showing the level of equity in access to basic development needs between nations. The UNDP’s HDI does not reflect the totality of human wellbeing. For example, it does not reflect inequalities and poverty within countries. Nor does it capture human security and levels of empowerment, but it is, nonetheless, a useful way of ranking the human wellbeing of nations on a 1-10 scale and comparing the lives of people in different countries or communities across the planet.

The UNDP’s 2015 Human Development Report showed that Norway, Australia and Switzerland led the HDI rankings in 2014, while the Sub-Sahara countries Chad, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Niger and Burundi were at the bottom.

It gets more interesting when we combine both the ecological footprint and Human Development Index of countries, as shown in the diagram below. The graph plots the ecological footprint of countries on one axis and their human development on the other. It highlights that the average person living in rich Global North countries for example the US, Australia, Canada and Norway, are vastly over-consuming way beyond what is a sustainable and equitable ecological footprint. It also highlights how the average person in Global South countries, for example Sierra Leone, face severe human development challenges while living well below their equitable per capita ecological footprint ‘entitlement’.

It is interesting to note that Cuba is one of the very few countries in the world where not only is the ecological footprint within the sustainable level of 1.8 hectares/person there is a high Human Development Index, making it the planet’s most sustainable and equitable country. In contrast, Australia is high on human development but way overshooting on ecological footprint.

It is clear that current global equity in environmental impacts and access to the resources for healthy and safe lives is not sustainable or just. Yet campaigns to extend human rights, shift wealth and create equity between the Global North to South and within nations are attacked and blocked by reactionary forces. Even modest efforts to increase aid to developing countries and fund climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives, are attacked - by the same voices that benefit from labour exploitation in developing economies, try to lock in fossil fuel dependency, promote militarism and war, and oppose immigration of people displaced by the impacts of these very policies.

Transition to a democratic ecological socialist economy

Given current patterns and trends it is irrational to bank on neoliberal values, free markets or new technology to reduce ecological footprints and reduce global inequity and poverty.

Business-as-usual is no longer an option as the gap between the rich and poor grows within and between countries and as ecological systems on which human depend collapse.

a) Alternative futures

The hegemony of neoliberalism and free-market ideology is collapsing. While the extreme Right, the Donald Trumps, Nigel Farages and Pauline Hansons and others tap into failures of socialist economy

There is no blueprint for moving beyond the failing neo-liberal consensus towards a democratic, equitable and ecologically sustainable socio-economic-political system. However, science tells us that radical systemic change occurs when contradictions and disturbances within an apparently stable system reach tipping points, leading to the breakdown of controlling mechanisms. Dysfunction, such as those caused by climate change, collapse of biodiversity, breakdown of food security, and mass movements of people due to conflict and loss of safety, cascade across social, economic, political and ecological domains, and across local and global scales. Crisis in one domain reinforces crisis in others, creating further disruption and hastening collapse. When collapse happens institutional patterns fail, old assumptions, values and power relationships fall apart, as the new emerges.
Social movements signal, escalate and intensify this process. As collapse occurs there is no guarantee that what replaces the old is necessarily going to be more democratic, equitable or ecologically sustainable, but there is scope in this rapidly changing world for new progressive social forces to become dominant, new ways of being to arise, and new systems for humans to interact together and with their environments. People’s movements may not control these processes but they can certainly influence outcomes.

b) Just transitions and environmental justice

Linking environmental justice campaigns with wider social change campaigns is essential to build foundations for a safer, fairer and more sustainable future. This synergy avoids ‘divide and rule’ problems and creates opportunities for progressive social movements to build power to organise proactively around alternative economic values and practices.

Currently, many people are feeling vulnerable and fearful as the contradictions of capitalist exploitation and ecological overshoot play out. Vulnerable communities must be core activists in campaigns for progressive change. Otherwise there is a risk that these communities will fear being further marginalised and be hostile to change, and actively oppose it in effect. This includes communities currently dependent on non-sustainable economic activities for their livelihoods, including workers and people in fossil fuel dependent communities in Australia who know change must happen but unless viable options are apparent there is fear they will be left paying the price of change.

The ‘just transition’ concept opens up some possibilities and strategies. The just transition concept was described by the Canadian Labour Council (CLC), a pioneer in the field, as a political campaign to “ensure that the costs of environmental change [towards sustainability] will be shared fairly” (Canadian Labour Congress, 2000). The concept has been adopted by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and also by the United Nations Environment Program, the International Labour Organisation, and the World Health Organisation. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Climate Change and Environment Policy, adopted at its May 2015 Congress, calls for a just transition which is described as: “taking a measured approach to restructuring to a lower carbon economy, and in particular ensuring that there are decent and good quality jobs available to workers in the new economy”.

A just transition, among many elements, involves giving adequate notice of the need to change to affected workers and their communities, providing income support and job guarantees during the change process (particularly for older and more vulnerable workers), access to training and education, investing in new jobs, and engaging workers and their organisations in consultations around economic and social adjustment processes and goals. It builds from the strengths of the whole community - its history and culture, skills, natural resources, organisations and networks, informal and formal economic assets.

A synergy between environmental justice campaigns and just transitions is possible, and desirable, and would require a holistic approach to campaigns for environmental change so they challenge economic, social, political injustices based on class, gender, race and other oppressions. This sort of synergy would mean, for example, that the environmental justice campaigns around transitions from fossil fuel dependency in places like the Hunter would include campaigning on social issues such as access to affordable housing, quality education and healthcare, income support and job creation, and meaningful public participation of all affected communities in a conversation about community futures. A successful synergy requires a broader understanding of the local ‘environment’ and ‘environment’ movement.

c) Disrupting business-as-usual, driving the trajectory of change

As Naomi Klein says “this [climate change] changes everything”. Transformative change is happening, and social movement organisations, are developing new ways of working to shape the future. Many social change organisations (like unions and major environment and welfare groups) are locked into formal arbitration and consultative processes that constrain their scope for radical action to incremental change. But there is plenty of evidence telling us that the transformative or revolutionary change needed for a democratic, equitable and ecological economy happens when people’s movements campaign outside these systems, as well as inside where strategic.

Economic restructuring towards an ecologically sustainable and equitable economy requires (among many challenges to the status quo) reversing trends towards loss of democracy and the privatisation of the global commons and public assets, applying ecological sustainability principles to development, establishing social ownership and control over dominant sectors of the economy - energy, water, health, education, finance, communications, and others, restoring quality public health, housing and education, and securing jobs with decent working conditions. Values of cooperation, mutual support, sufficiency, and meeting community needs should be economic drivers rather than competition, consumerism, exploitation and profit, and growth addiction.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of strong labour, environment and other social movement collaborations that bring together just transitions and environmental justice politics around these sorts of campaigns. But, when even modest transitional measures are proposed they are attacked. The Gillard Government’s clean energy package, for example, with modest renewable energy targets, clean energy finance budgets, and a carbon price framed within the current market-dominated paradigm provoked the rage of from reactionary forces. Clearly, transitional programs need a high level of political education, protest, and organising to defend and extend gains.

Socialist and progressive people’s movements, including SEARCH members, have a rich legacy of radical political theory and practice in the labour movement, indigenous, women’s, sexual rights, public health, housing and education campaigns, and environment and international solidarity movements (and others) to draw from, and to continue to learn from. Making rapid radical change towards social, economic and ecological justice is essential if billions of people, and the life-supporting systems we depend on, are to avoid catastrophe, and turn fear and despair into hope.

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Justice and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

by Ariel Salleh

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets launched in September 2015 by the United Nations and heads of state, are described as a universal plan of action for ‘people, planet, and prosperity’ to take effect over the next fifteen years. There is no doubt that the global situation is dire. The UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, Transforming our world! lists: intense natural disasters / land degradation / freshwater scarcity / and biodiversity loss / global health threats / conflict / displaced populations / wealth disparities / gender inequality / youth unemployment.

The SDGs are designed to attract a multi-trillion dollar budget to protect the Earth from further degradation including climate change. The aim is to ‘manage natural resources for sustainable production’ so meeting the needs of present and future generations. The hope is to end world poverty by 2030. In line with the UN Charter and Declaration of Human Rights, equality and the empowerment of women, children, the disabled, migrants, and least developed nations is emphasised.

The SDGs extend an earlier set of UN Millennium Development Goals. However, these were unsuccessful; in the words of Caribbean feminist Peggy Antrobus, MDG = ‘Most Distracting Gimmick.’ The SDGs broaden the MDGs by attempting to integrate ‘the three pillars of sustainable development - economic, social, and environment’. Yet already, this statement reveals the silo thinking that compromises the UN program.

Capitalism is an inherently contradictory production system. A first contradiction shows up in the separation and tensions between Economy versus Society. Thus, if SDGs will stabilise food prices, the international banking system is left alone. The SDGs are to be realised by growing GDP through technology innovation and transfer, market deregulation, and more power to the WTO. Foreign debt repayments for less developed countries will be dealt with by new investment opportunities.

The model seems to follow the famous 1980s Brandtland Report which promoted economic growth and trickle-down benefits as the solution to poverty. What was overlooked was the fact that capital accumulation by some, depends on appropriating the resources and labour time of others - workers, housewives, peasants, and indigenous peoples. No surprise that the idea of ‘sustainable development’ is widely considered an oxymoron these days.

London School of Economics anthropologist Jason Hickel calculates that if we measure poverty by the $5 a day marker, then more than 60 per cent of humans are poor. ‘Given the existing ratio between GDP growth and the income growth of the poorest, it will take 207 years to eliminate poverty with the SDG strategy, and to get there we will have to grow the global economy by 175 times its present size’.

Now the UN has been open to private sector interests since the 1980s. In fact, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development was very active in drafting Agenda 21 at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. By the time of Rio+20 in 2012, the private sector had enlisted public relations agencies, big NGOs, and ambitious academics, in what they called multi-stakeholder consultations for a green economy. In the same year, at Davos in 2012, world business leaders put forward a Global Redesign Initiative. While European moves towards Earth System Governance as a form of neoliberal constitutionalism are gaining ground as well.

The SDG agenda is to be directed by a Global Partnership of corporations, government, and UN bureaucrats known as the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The Public Private Partnership (PPP) model is now a UN norm. So while implementation and financing of SDGs is voluntary and targets are aspirational, annual progress reviews - regional, national, and international - will be serviced by the public sector UN bureaucracy.

If the first contradiction of capitalism explains how social deprivation is a corollary of economic growth. The second contradiction of capital shows up in the separation and tensions between Economy versus Ecology, because capital accumulation undercuts the very environmental conditions that make it possible. There is little sense in speaking of sustainable development while advocating continued extractivism, expanding high-tech dependency, global free trade, and rising GDP rates.

Again as Hickel puts it: ‘Right now global production and consumption levels are overshooting our planet’s capacity by about 50 per cent each year’. Moreover, ‘... let’s say that poor countries manage to grow incredibly fast, and quickly catch up to the average high-income-country. According to data provided by the Global Footprint Network, we would need at least 3-4 Earths to sustain this level of production and consumption - and that’s assuming that the already-high-income countries slow their present rates of growth to zero, which they show no sign of doing.’

If SDG financialisation is voluntary and loosely described by the UN, the role of technological innovation is laid out in detail. SDG 7a anticipates an investment boom, with ‘enhanced international cooperation’ around infrastructure for renewables and advanced clean and efficient fossil fuel technology. As noted, developing countries are the target for this next wave of economic accumulation, an ecological modernisation strategy tied into expanded global information networks.

Thus Transforming our world, para 70 announces: ‘We hereby launch a Technology Facilitation Mechanism ... [This will] integrate the informal working group on technology facilitation, namely: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Environment Programme, UNIDO, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNCTAD, International Telecommunication Union, WIPO and the World Bank’.

The cradle-to-grave costs of mechanised solutions to sustainability questions - mining, smelting, manufacture, transport, and ongoing energy drawdowns for daily operation, seriously exacerbate the second contradiction of capital. Eco-modernisation relies on a distinctly unsustainable toll of mining, soil erosion and toxicity, water wastage, and atmospheric greenhouse emissions. This flies in the face of all SDGs.

What is to be done?
Part II: Bringing Sustainability Down to Earth

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals launched in September 2015, called for a maximum global temperature increase of no more than 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. But did the December Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) respond? No, at COP21 in Paris, serious efforts to reduce emissions were postponed to 2020, with net-zero targets to be realised after 2050.

The consumption lifestyle advanced by international elites North and South, means that 10% of the world’s population puts out 60% of greenhouse gases. Yet a UN beholden to the corporate sector is incapable of making affluent nations accept historical responsibility for the crisis. The democratic principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ for rich and poor countries was replaced in Paris by undefined gestures known as Intended Nationally Determined Contributions.

It seems fair for peoples of the global South to demand a polluter pays principle covering reparations from the North where their livelihoods and jobs are lost through industry generated climate impacts. But at COP21, binding references to human rights, intergenerational equity, and food sovereignty, were moved from Agreement to preamble.

The urgent need to control emissions from mining, animal agriculture, deforestation, aviation and shipping was sidelined. Renewables were advocated - but on par with ineffectual solutions like offsets and carbon trading, and risky ideas like fracking, nuclear power, and geengineering. Financial commitments for transitioning were a mere 1000 billion US$ per annum. Compare the 5000 billion per annum that goes into fossil fuel subsidies.

South African activist Patrick Bond has pointed out that the indifference of major powers to climate justice was already clear by June 2015 in a G7 memo for no decarbonisation before next century. What is worse, in the real-politik of Paris, climate deregulation was promoted by default, in the enthusiasm for the free trade treaties - TTIP and TPP.

A major problem in the ‘climate debate’ is the fact that it and SDG implementation too, follow the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) conceptualisation of warming using planetary parameters. This shifts the action to international diplomacy, away from people’s own capacities to act in any way other than as consumers.

One possible grassroots sustainability strategy, combining the aims of SDGs and climate remediation, is integrated watershed management. As Slovak hydrologist and anti-dam activist Michal Kravčík argues, taking care of water locally is the key to global climate stabilisation. His thesis rests on an holistic science and empirical practice that challenge the repressive ‘land over water’ mindset of eurocentric engineering.

Traditionally, the ‘hydraulic mission’ has been to exercise ‘men’s control over nature’ by dividing land and water, keeping water behind dam walls or expelling it to the sea in concrete channels. The effect has been that in cities, impervious paved surfaces result in flooded streets and damaged homes. Urban areas with no capacity for natural evapo-transpiration through trees, result in heat plates in the air above. The local small water cycle that brings rain is now disturbed and soon, random atmospheric heating sets up chaotic weather patterns.

Likewise in rural areas that have been mined or over farmed, rain hitting the earth without plants to break its fall or organic humus to absorb it, denudes slopes and washes fertile soil away, polluting freshwater streams. New water paradigm thinking treats land and water as intrinsic to each other. Rain must stay where it falls to rehydrate land and underground aquifers, renew soil texture through living organisms, nourish green plants to cool the atmosphere through evapo-transpiration. This process not only serves food sovereignty, it can bring back local rain cycles, and if carried out in regions across the world, help get the global cooling cycle back in place.

As a model of climate mitigation, integrated catchment management is inexpensive, using hands-on structures made from local stone, wood, and plants, designed and carried out by communities. The new water paradigm simultaneously creates livelihood, jobs and education skills; social solidarity and empowerment. The method is already successful in Portugal, Rajasthan, California, the Loess Plateau, Slovakia, and Newcastle.

The new water paradigm makes an integrative reading of climate science. It resolves the second contradiction of capitalism by reclaiming global warming as an ecological not an economic problem. Rather than relying on silo thinking, trading hypothetical units of carbon, and leaning on reluctant elites to give money away, social movements might revive their increasingly single issue environmental politics with ‘a water-soil-biodiversity coalition for climate’.

Returning to the UN SDGs, goals 14 and 15 already recognise that climate is a complex non-linear system implicated with the functioning of water bodies; and that protection of vegetated ecosystems will help prevent warming, desertification, and biodiversity loss. But the agency of water is backgrounded under the SDG development by investment model.

As Canadian water advocate Maude Barlow observes, World Bank policy currently mandates the universal privatisation of supply. So SDG 6.a favours the transnational application of corporate water management technologies for sanitation, water harvesting, desalination, waste water, and recycling. These manufactured and traded solutions will exacerbate both first and second contradictions of capitalism.
On a more optimistic note: it was the enforced privatisation of water in Bolivia that led to a people’s uprising and progressive alliances between women-workers-and-indigenous peoples. They went on to host an impressive Peoples’ Climate Summit in 2010. In 2012, citizens of Mexico proposed the Coordinadora Nacional Agua para Tod’s Agua para la Vida Mexico, a law to protect water sovereignty by care for local catchments. Care giving labour - for new generations, for land, water, and biodiversity - is prerequisite to sustainability. The international peasant union Via Campesina already claims that their small scale provisioning ‘cools down the earth’. In the global North too, more and more people transition to degrowth and commoning for eco-sufficiency.

How can we make sure these voices are heard in the next round of UN SDGs?

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Biodiversity
- the dropped ball on the environmental front

by Bob Makinson

As with all environmental matters, the biodiversity scene is made up of a complex interplay between human and non-human elements and processes. Non-human entities and ecological processes – the natural biota of the country and the sea – always were and still are supported by natural physical and biological factors, some modified by human impacts, indigenous and settler, and others not or scarcely modified. But as we all know, the human impacts have grown exponentially in recent centuries and are largely out of control.

First, the biological situation. We know more than we ever have, but our quota of ignorance of the natural world is still very large. We do not yet know how much biodiversity exists. Total global biodiversity is uncertain by an order of magnitude – plausible estimates vary from 10M to 100M species.

In Australia, a good consensus estimate is that we have about 650,000 species (excluding microbes – although these underpin everything else!).

Current estimates are:
- Mammals 252 (206 endemic, 58 threatened, 27 extinct)
- Birds 800+ (650 endemic, 101 threatened, 25 extinct)
- Plants 22,000 (14,000 endemic, 1,200 listed threatened, 62 extinct)
- Fungi 250,000? (only about 5% scientifically described)
- Invertebrates 338,000?

Our knowledge of Australia’s biota, at least to the level of scientific description and naming (and excepting microbes and microfungi), has expanded enormously over the last 40 years, largely as a result of a national documentation effort launched under Whitlam, confirmed under Fraser, and somehow surviving (but only barely) to this day. This effort to document Australia’s biodiversity of species, peaked in the period 1985-2005, as did the scientific workforce that undertook the task – mostly in the public sector.

In the same period, but with rather different drivers, the level of ecological knowledge also grew geometrically, and this trend has not slowed. For the most part this has focussed on relationships between organisms, or between organisms and a limited range of their non-biological enablers, but there have been elements of growth in knowledge and theory towards larger-scale, more holistic analyses, that if not fully Gaian in their underlying premises, are at least beginning to put larger sections of jigsaw together. Wisely though, the scientific effort is not putting synthesis or philosophy before primary investigation, but there is some pretty advanced systems thinking going on (as well as some scientifically reckless ideas and some very silly policy prescriptions). The higher-level systems thinking has been most publicly obvious in the area of climate change and its effects, but that is only one dimension, albeit an important one.

These two sets of overlapping knowledge growth – taxonomic and ecological – have been integral to understanding the levels and modes of action of the biological, biophysical, and human threats to Australian and global biodiversity. I don’t have time here to review threat statistics, but here are two global statistics that are pretty fundamental:

The human footprint: Directly or indirectly, we intercept 23-40% of the planet’s nett primary (photosynthetic) productivity – a huge proportion (see, e.g. Foley et al. 2007, Haberl et al. 2007 – both in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (USA); Vitousek et al. 1986 in Bioscience).

Current rate of extinction of species: ‘Background’ average extinction rates are estimated at around one species/year – about 0.0001%, depending on your global biodiversity estimate. Current estimates of extinction rates (across all species) range from 10,000 to 30,000 species per year. On quite conservative estimates, human-mediated extinctions are up to 10,000 times the background rate – before climate change is fully factored in. Extreme low estimates are 100x background; extreme high 100,000x. [See good summaries of the estimates are given by IUCN, the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UK), and in papers by EO Wilson and others.

Within Australia, there are currently 1 766 species and 76 ecological communities assessed listed as Threatened under Commonwealth legislation (in categories ranging from ‘Vulnerable’ to ‘Critically Endangered’). This is however a great underestimate, for several reasons. Nearly all species assessed and listed are plants or vertebrates, and mostly terrestrial ones at that – the knowledge gap for determining the extinction-risk status, and even the identity, of...
invertebrate, fungal and microbial groups is very large. (Similarly with ecological communities – these are only gradually being defined at reasonably close scale, and listing processes don’t always allow for recognition of the fine-grain variants). Secondly, even for plants and vertebrates, the Commonwealth list, for bureaucratic reasons, does not not capture all the species listed or known to qualify for listing at State levels – the shortfall is probably of the order of several hundred. Finally, the listing system necessarily sets certain threshold criteria for listing – there are very many (i.e. thousands) of Australian species in decline that either do not yet satisfy those criteria, or for which assessment information is still lacking. There are also ecologically fundamental species (the emu would be an example) whose decline over much of their range in eastern Australia preceded the historical threshold of the listing schemes.

So there are a lot of threatened species. But that leads us to a big problem of public and political perception - that biodiversity conservation is all about, or mainly about, threatened species (and national parks). It isn’t. Biodiversity conservation is about the whole biota, and if we are to arrest the decline in the long run, biodiversity conservation has to be conceptually, and in policy and investment, integrated with water, soil, land-use, ocean-use, and other domains. From a socialist perspective, that immediately brings us up against massive vested private interests and an economic system that cannot accept restrictions on profit except at the margins. And reinforcing those are political and legal constraints to do with constitutional arrangements, the role of the State, and private property regimes for land and its exploitation. I will return to these human factors later.

The main threatening processes for both species and ecological communities in Australia are loss of habitat and connection (land-clearing and its legacy of demographic and genetic fragmentation); the closely connected legacy of pastoralism and its associated impacts (especially on soils, nutrient flux, and hydrology); invasive species (weeds, pests and pathogens, nearly all of them exotic); and, in some areas, disrupted fire regimes.

All of these threatening processes have been at work for up to two centuries in different parts of the country. All have been closely related to the pattern and social basis of European settlement and its modern successor society, with displacement of indigenous peoples and their practices, and the imposition of an overwhelmingly dominant private form of land-ownership and transfer that has historically been driven by a strongly exploitative land-use system and associated ideological mindset, on the part of both government and landholders. Both system and mindset are, as in nearly all settler societies, oblivious or hostile to notions of long-term husbandry, moderation, and custodianship – notwithstanding local exceptions.

The above threatening processes are the ones that are doing the damage, not just historically but right now, and they will continue to be the operative, proximal drivers of biodiversity decline even into the coming period of climate change. Climate change may accentuate some and reduce others, but its worst impacts will for the most part, at least on land, operate through those other proximal threat processes and their historical legacy.

Australia has a very poor history of dealing with those threatening processes. Very few have been eliminated. A few specific ones have been controlled very effectively (e.g. Prickly Pear), or partially (rabbits). But the more general case of continued introduction and naturalisation of invasive feral species continues – as a nation we talk big about quarantine but things keep arriving, and many of those already here are deemed to be too expensive or too politically sensitive to really eradicate (deer, horses, camels). Globalisation and adherence to trade agreements that override sovereignty are exacerbating the problem.

Many threatening processes are, in public service parlance, being ‘actively managed’, but that is all too often code for localised, non-systematic and sporadic efforts that only provide limited relief. Most of the serious threatening processes are still expanding, and doing immense environmental damage. Some are out of control (e.g. Myrtle Rust, a recently arrived disease that attacks many plant species in the family that includes eucalypts and paperbarks). High-impact pathogens like this one, are a fairly new and very scary front in the fight for conservation. The risk of further exotic pests is exacerbated by increasing volumes and speeds of biological and agricultural imports, and by a trade regime in which potential profit still tends to outweigh quarantine considerations pretty consistently. The agriculture sector is well served by a framework of cross-jurisdictional response agreements and funding (from taxpayers and industry levies) for addressing ‘incursions’ of exotic species and diseases. There is no such national framework for addressing threatening processes that primarily affect wild biodiversity.

Turning now briefly to some of the human factors.

The ongoing global and Australian declines in biodiversity, were once more central in environmental debates in this country, but have been relegated to background status in the debates of recent years – especially given the dominance of carbon and climate in the public arena since about 2000.

While progressive attention is elsewhere, in Australia the decline of biodiversity is steepening, and the policy, legislative and institutional settings that should enable conservation are (with some exceptions) going backwards.

Technical capacities are better than they have ever been. The national body of expertise built up since 1980 still exists, but the public-sector conservation workforce, and the public sector capacity to use conservation science and expertise, has been drastically eroded. This of course is in common with many other parts of the public sector – the trend to short-term and contract-based public employment, and to large-scale outsourcing, are a common factor with both policy and industrial implications for us. The decline in public sector expertise is now reaching critical levels.

One institutional factor in this has been the national trend (in environment as well as in other portfolios) for what were once stand-alone, mission-oriented environmental agencies (usually constituted as Statutory Authorities, in which the dog wagged the tail) to be resorbed into the environment Departments. As a result they have become far more vulnerable to staff and budget cuts, mission erosion, collective behaviour modification, policy flips, short-termism, and political whims and instability (in the 20 years since 1995, the NSW environment agency has had 11 different Ministers, several name changes, and endless and mostly regressive restructures). While human assets have been eroded at most levels, it is worth noting that some categories of relatively unskilled jobs concerned with conservation – field staff
in particular, and especially but not limited to Indigenous staff in the bush – are being progressively forced out of public service jobs and onto contracts, on the pretext that they don’t or can’t meet the requirements for increasingly bureaucratised job application procedures and minimum qualifications.

Off-reserve conservation and natural resource management in NSW received a big boost with the formation of the Catchment Management Authorities in the early 2000s, largely inspired by the very effective intervention by the Wentworth Group of concerned scientists, and the co-occurrence of Native Vegetation Act 2003. The CMAAs lasted 11 years before being scrapped for the current Local Land Services (with a more restricted remit). The NVA is in the process of being repealed.

Again, the environment portfolios are certainly not unique in this regard. Socialist work for reform in the public sector (and its unions) should include work for the defence and creation of new mechanisms and institutional forms and practices by which these malign strategies of erosion of public assets can be reduced. There is a large, and largely discontented, scientific and technical workforce in the public-sector environmental, NRM, agricultural and cultural agencies, that are predisposed to progressive policy and disgruntled with current trends, but with no political or effective industrial outlet. This needs attention, including from socialists active in the public service unions.

On government investment, the trends are uneven. The Howard government in 1996 engineered something between a split and a buy-off in the formerly very united sector of peak conservation NGOs, using the Natural Heritage Trust (funded by the sale of Telstra). This was a very substantial investment, but came from asset sale, not from core government revenue. It was designed to yield multiple benefits, only some of them related to conservation, and did not address the decline in expertise within the government agencies – if anything it accelerated that decline through a greater focus on project management of work performed externally. Nevertheless we should not make simplistic claims about decline of government investment on biodiversity – we have to be across the nuances. There has recently been new major investment (much of it to contracted private conservation bodies) from the Feds (feral cat control, and new predator-exclusion mammal reserves), and in NSW a $100M allocation over five years for the State’s Threatened Species Program.

Alongside investment, there has been a large amount of intellectual effort that has gone into devising market-type systems for getting around inconvenient biodiversity considerations in order to facilitate development. The notions of biodiversity off-setting (treating species and bushland as so much furniture to be moved around or replaced), biodiversity certification, and biodiversity credits (i.e. financial payments to be able to destroy) are prime examples. Some have been in legislation for some time, e.g. in NSW, where the new Act is likely to push offsetting beyond all rationale bounds. None of these mechanisms are inherently unreasonable at a certain scale -- the question is how it is done, and what the main agenda is. That said, there are also some quite good schemes in some other jurisdictions to encourage and reward private-land conservation – again we have to be on top of the nuances.

At a Constitutional level, biodiversity management has always fallen mainly under State and Territory control, with Commonwealth powers developed only in certain areas – mainly where issues relate to Commonwealth lands, or come under the head of international agreements. This has always been a two-edged sword, but has sometimes been an effective constitutional base for bringing Commonwealth powers into play against destructive State-level policies in over the last 20 or 30 years -- but it is an inherently fragile legal base. The ‘new federalism’ being developed first under Abbott and likely to be continued under Turnbull, and with some support from parts of Labor, represents a risk of Commonwealth divestment of power.

Then there is legislative ‘reform’. The high-water mark of strong environmental legislation was the period 1990-2005. Over the last decade, while legislation has not necessarily changed, there has been a general trend towards weakening of subordinate regulation and enforcement, and a setting of the scene for full-on legislative backsliding. In NSW, there has been sustained attack, mainly from part of the farming sector and the National Party, on the NSW Native Vegetation Act. This culminated in mid-2013 with the announcement (at a National Party conference! that the whole of that Act and the Threatened Species Conservation Act would be reviewed. Drafting is now (Nov. 2015) well underway for a new Biodiversity Conservation Act, to be introduced probably in mid-2016. It is likely to be a mixed bag, but you can bet that the provisions for protection of native vegetation will be weakened from current levels.

At Commonwealth level, the recent House of Reps inquiry into the advocacy rights and charitable status arrangements for environmental organisations is not yet completed. While the risk of it being used as an instrument to attack the financial base of the NGOs may have lessened a bit with Turnbull’s ascension and Alex Hawke’s stepping down as Inquiry Chair, the risk has not evaporated. The NGO-sector response to this inquiry was huge, even though not publicly very visible, and probably represents one of the most comprehensive outreach exercises by the peak conservation councils for quite some time.

De-funding of the non-government network of Environmental Defenders Offices has been a big blow. This network remains crucial to preparing the legal basis for many court challenges, and in providing solid synthetic reviews of the legal landscape for campaigns. Lobbying for the restoration of support funding for the EDOs should be a priority for our work in all parties of government.

That brings us, finally, to the non-government environmental movement as a whole (including the bits of it that are concerned with biodiversity and natural area conservation), and the wider and crucial question of our public support base.

Taking the latter first – public support for generalised environmental values has remained high and remarkably stable over recent decades, although with a certain amount of volatility in response to dominant issues of the day (e.g. drought during the 2000s). Support for biodiversity conservation as a specific subset of environmental protection is also reasonable, although never the main issue in the public mind. There is really good data on public attitudes, especially in NSW where the ‘Who Cares About The Environment’ reports, based on statistically careful polling, have been compiled every three years since 1994. These reports should be primary background resources for us.

The non-government environmental movement is incredibly diverse. It ranges from the community-based groups (themselves going from purely local “patch protection” groups through to the broad-scale alliances against over-development and the mining
industry), to philanthropically funded and highly professional organisations dedicated to the acquisition of private land for biodiversity conservation.

If there is one explicit uniting principal of this vast spread of groups, it is the old slogan from the 1980s, “Think globally, act locally”. And indeed it is remarkable how often you find, in the suburban and regional and rural groups, that some of the prime movers are, or were, old stayers from the anti-uranium movement of the 70s, the peace movement of the 80s, and the reconciliation movement of the 90s. Many of these groups are of course affiliated to the State and regional peak environmental councils, themselves poorly funded. I don’t know anyone who has a complete handle of these groups nationwide or even Statewide, although Drew and his colleagues in the CSG and anti-coal mining movement would have the closest current understanding of many of them. There is I think no point in trying to pursue any form of different organisation of this myriad of groups, other than to strengthen the support that the larger organisations can provide them with and their networks of intercommunication. Their whole strength lies in their localism, and they have proved more than capable of uniting in campaign work.

But those groups, and most particularly the ones in the rural and regional centres, are opening up windows of access to sectors of the population long closed from most left and progressive influences.

This is a priceless strategic asset for not just the environment movement but – if treated right – for the whole progressive side of politics. Every ten years or so for the last three decades, there has been a wave of largely self-driven organisation around a major progressive social issue in the rural zones, at least in NSW and SE Qld and sometimes in Victoria. In the 1980s it was the peace and disarmament movement – 50-odd locally based peace groups around NSW, and one in every electorate in Victoria. In the 90s and into the 2000s it was local Reconciliation groups, on the same scale. Landcare and the proliferation of Greens groups of course have run in parallel and mutual reinforcement of these non-metropolitan trends over much of the same period. There is a very large reservoir of progressive potential out there, as there is in the outer suburbs. The pity of the last 20 years is that there has been little or no organised approach to this potential, rural, regional and urban - other than on a purely ‘campaign’ basis. A more strategic socialist approach – principled, respectful, and prepared to learn rather than preach – has been largely lacking.

Bob Makinson is a conservation botanist who until recently worked for 35 years in public sector science (both State and Commonwealth). Retrenched, like many other scientists and conservation managers in recent ‘restructures’, he is now making his way in Mr Turnbull’s brave new world.

The Climate Dialectic: Burying Capital?

by James Goodman

Society, not humanity, produces climate change – and that means capitalism. Many are now arguing that climate change creates a new era, an ‘anthropocene’, where human agency dictates planetary geology. But this new era is produced by ‘capital in general’, not by ‘humanity in general’: we are live in a capitalocene, not an anthropocene.

Climate crisis – and climate policy - reflects the increasingly dominant ecological contradictions of capitalism. Capitalism appropriates ecologies at the same time as it exploits workers: its surplus is appropriated from nature, as a ‘free’ windfall, as much as it is squeezed from labour power.

Crises of appropriation are generally localised – until now. With climate change the impacts are writ large, as a global system crisis. Access to cheap fossil fuel energy is central to accumulation: capitalist development is synonymous with fossil fuel dependence. Reflecting this, the competitive barbarism of growth and profit is now trumping efforts at ‘decarbonisation’.

Climate Agency and Contestation

In the face of crisis we are seeing new forms of climate agency – both from ‘above’ and ‘below’. The energy that drives society is now contested and politicised in new ways. New divisions are emerging between blocs of capital, for and against fossil fuels. There is strong evidence of a backlash from vested interests and forces for reaction and authoritarianism, but there are also new possibilities for social transformations and democratisation.

The contest is dynamic and expansive: climate change now has world historical significance that subsumes other crises and creates a new framework for social change.

Climate change is cumulative, and is time-limited. Unlike economic or financial crises, climate crisis is not cyclical. It does not enable a ‘correction’ within the wider system and is not functional for capitalism.

As emissions rise the crisis can only intensify, and not even in a linear sense, as the knock-on effects make it exponential. The more that states deny, manage or displace the crisis, the more that crisis deepens.

Crucially, there are now clear horizons for capital, and for alternatives. We may debate the difference between ‘evolutionary’ and ‘revolutionary’ socialism, but there is no ‘evolutionary ecologism’. Put simply, an evolved capitalism will not decarbonise by 2050.

A Climate dialectic?

Interpreted as a ‘climate dialectic’, the political process of climate change has a cascading logic, across multiplying social fields, subsuming justice. In this way it ‘socialises’ climate crisis from the ecosystem into all fields of state policy. As the dialectic intensifies, the socialisation process deepens.

The climate dialectic, in the sense of a consciousness of social agency in climate change, emerges with the popularisation of climate science post-1988, and with the growing contest over how to address it. With this we move from a two-world model of nature and society at odds, into the co-production of ecology and capitalist society.

As with all dialectical change, transformation comes from both sides of the equation. Climate change is produced by capitalism, but creates new forms of social change that literally transform society beyond capital. Just as the working class is created by capital and then becomes the force for burying it, so climate change is both
produced by capital and forces us beyond it.

Socialising Climate – Transforming Society

We can see this happening in the direct collision between climate policy and energy policy. States are central to emissions production: state-corporate ‘capitalisation’ is foundation for fossil fuel extraction and commodification.

States routinely assert climate change as their greatest challenge and then deliberately choose to maximise fossil fuel extraction in order to compete on global markets. This transposes the capital-nature contradiction into the heart of state policy – directly undermining legitimacy of energy regimes and in the process creating new political constituencies (anti-CSG being an example).

With expanded extraction, efforts at managing emissions have unravelled disastrously. Neoliberals continue to flog the dead horse of emissions trading, along with offsetting (to poor countries), and ‘pricing carbon’. After the EU ETS no-one seriously believes such ‘market solutions’ have any possibility of getting close to achieving decarbonisation.

Other techno-dreamers still believe in end-of-pipe solutions. Carbon capture and storage is still touted by coal advocates as the solution to coal emissions despite zero evidence. With the obvious moral hazard, there is still over-blown talk of the capacity to adapt and the need for ‘resilience’. And of course we have the insistence on climate geoengineering as a ‘last resort’.

What is remarkable is how the real debate has moved on. Market pricing to ‘phase out’ fossil fuels has become the preserve of the true believers. The ETS false solution now points to measures that directly socialise the energy system. Direct regulations and public investment are now widely embraced as key mechanisms. Proposals for socialised energy provision are being advanced.

The agenda is driven by new constituencies, mobilised in new fronts in the struggle against fossil fuels. ‘Climate action’ advocacy led by environmental NGOs, has been overtaken by movements fusing social justice with climate action. This has opened the door to a new direct action movement focused on concrete actions to produce change, beyond abstract policy.

A global wave of campaigns against coal mining and CSG has created a new political force beyond the cities. Campaigns centred on the material impacts of climate change, for water, health and for work, have engaged new players, including farmers, nurses and firefighters. Community renewables and campaigns for ‘just transition’ and ‘energy democracy’ have created a new political base in communities. Divestment campaigns have produced new legitimacy for the struggle, at the centre of capital.

The global anti-fossil fuel bloc is building as a political force and driving a wedge in capital, isolating the fossil fuel sector. This sets in train an open-ended dynamic of transition and transformation, to directly address the causes of the crisis. Already, faith in low-emissions under growth-centred capitalism is increasingly under question.

As decarbonisation fails, the agenda of de-growth is gaining ground, and solutions that constrain assumptions of unlimited growth for capital and profit are coming onto the table. Whether framed as ‘living well’ or ‘prosperity without growth’ de-growth concepts have entered the mainstream.

All, in one way or another, signal the necessity for a wholesale socialisation of the economy in the name of emission reduction. Whether that is called post-growth society or post-capitalism, it comes down to the same thing: a whole new social order.

Such is the power of the intensifying ‘climate dialectic’.

James Goodman conducts research into social change and global politics, with a special focus on global justice and climate justice. He is co-author of ‘Climate Upsurge’ (2014) and ‘Justice Globalism’ (2013). He has been on the management committee of the overseas aid-monitoring group, AidWatch, since 1999. He works at UTS where is convenes a new Climate Justice research centre.

**Major power station closures**

– can we learn to do structural adjustment better?

by Peter Colley

There will be many new jobs created by the transition to clean energy. But most of those jobs won’t be where the jobs are lost in current energy industries, and the skill sets required will be quite different. There is also an obvious concern about lower paid and insecure jobs replacing well paid permanent employment.

Limiting global warming to 1.5 to 2 degrees means achieving net zero emissions of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere – a huge task. One which ultimately has to be addressed across all industries and how we live, but which targets stationary power generation in the first instance because it is a large source of emissions that is more technically capable of emissions reduction.

Australia used to be a cheap energy country, based on its abundant and easy-accessible coal resources. Energy intensive industries like aluminium smelting relocated from Japan and Europe in the last half century to take advantage of that, creating jobs and export income.

The globalized aluminium industry has already seen the writing on the wall – Australia has stopped being a cheap energy country (more due to high transmission, distribution and retail costs than due to...
the price of coal or renewables) and we know that carbon pricing or some other penalisation of carbon emissions is inevitable. The aluminium industry is relocating again – this time to zero emission power generation locations like Canada (hydropower) or Iceland (geothermal). We know the Australia car industry is shutting down; smelters and other energy-intensive industries are closing too and it is hard to see another smelter ever being built here.

The CFMEU represents about 2,000 people employed in coal power plants in Victoria and NSW. Across the country at least 5,000 are employed in such stations; it’s more like 10,000 if contractor workforces and those in dependent coal mines are included.

That’s not many people in a national workforce of about 12 million. But these workforces are concentrated in regional communities where they are the base of well paid secure jobs on which a lot of other economic activity hangs.

In places like the Latrobe valley in Victoria, Collie in Western Australia and Lithgow in NSW, power generation and associated coal mining can provide 10% of all employment. The flow-on employment in suppliers – that supply both the power plants and the workers – is more than that again.

A 2016 study by the Committee for Gippsland on the possible near term closure of two of the four brown coal power stations in Victoria found that 1400 direct jobs would be lost, and another 1800 in local suppliers. Even in a wider regional workforce of 89,000, this would be more than enough to plunge the region into recession. Another big hit after the recession induced by the privatisations of the 1990s.

This has been the experience in the UK too. When Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher smashed the British coal miners’ union in the 1984-85 coal strike, coal mining shrank from 225,000 workers to 140,000 by 1992. 2015 saw the closure of the last underground coal mine in the UK. Alongside the loss of heavy industry, large swathes of the UK outside of London and the south-east were plunged into recession from which it has taken decades to recover.

This is the nub – in the process of achieving major reductions in emissions to mitigate global warming we are facing major structural adjustment, and Australia like most countries doesn’t handle that well. The industries do adjust – the investors take the loss on their portfolio and move on. But the workers and their communities take it much harder.

When Mitsubishi stopped making cars here in 2008, only one third of the workforce succeeded in finding alternative comparable jobs. One third found much worse employment, and one third never worked again. This terrible result looks set to be repeated on a much larger scale with the last three car makers closing down. South Australia will be pushed into double digit unemployment. The workforce of 130,000 in 1990 shrank to just 10,000 in 2015, with the last mines to close in 2018. But in this case, it was done through a tripartite process involving business, government and unions where social costs were prioritised rather than regarded as an afterthought. Younger workers were rotated from closing mines to others with more years to run, retraining took place prior to retrenchment, and older workers had pensions guaranteed to enable them to take early retirement.

Jobs have already been found for 800 of the last 1,400 workers to be made redundant in 2018. In Australia it is beyond our comprehension that such a thing could be done. We are used to big restructuring decisions being made, and then dribbles of money being made available for labour market programs that do little more than slow the bleeding in devastated communities.

The CFMEU is pushing a Just Transition program for coal power station workforces and associated mines. This includes requiring power station employers to offer redundancies and redeployment across multiple power stations in a region in order to cushion the impact of individual plant closures.

The climate policy that Labor took to the last election included this, alongside strong measures to reduce emissions. The CFMEU has detected some interest from business groups and businesses in the industry. There is a growing recognition that the process of achieving major emissions reduction will be harder, not easier, if workforce and community impacts are ignored.

Re-engineering the energy industries to achieve net zero emissions will require hundreds of billions in new investment. While a lot of jobs will be created, most won’t be in the regions that lose out from power station closures. Distributed renewable energy by its very nature is not centralised into particular regions the way coal power is.

And it should be pointed out that most of the new jobs are in construction or installation, while operations and maintenance jobs will be few. The decline of manufacturing in Australia means we have already largely lost the race to be manufacturers of things like solar cells and wind turbines. Even Germany’s relatively successful manufacturing industry has found itself losing out to Chinese solar cells.

The costs of providing genuine just transition to coal power regions will be significant – perhaps billions over two decades. Germany was spending that much per year on phasing out jobs in black coal. This amount is small in the context of the cost of rebuilding the energy industries. But it needs a paradigm shift – away from the view that it is acceptable standard practice for workers and their communities to be sacrificed on the altar of either the free market or government policy – in this case climate policy.

If Australia can learn to do structural adjustment better with respect to domestic power generation it opens up opportunities for similar efforts in other industries – whether those industries are restructuring due to climate policy or other pressures.

We have to learn to do better than this. The international union movement has been promoting Just Transition, and that language is in the UN Paris Agreement on action to reduce global warming to 1.5 to 2 degrees. But giving it reality is another matter.

Some Scandinavian and European Union countries have done it better – though it has never been easy. In Germany the black coal mining industry has been phased out for economic (rather than environmental) reasons. The workforce of 130,000 in 1990 shrank to just 10,000 in 2015, with the last mines to close in 2018. But in this case, it was done through a tripartite process involving business, government and unions where social costs were prioritised rather than regarded as an afterthought. Younger workers were rotated from closing mines to others with more years to run, retraining took place prior to retrenchment, and older workers had pensions guaranteed to enable them to take early retirement.

Peter Colley is a SEARCH member and the National Research Director, Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union Mining and Energy Division.
Energy Democracy:
Let the Facts Speak for Themselves (Their Green Shift, and Ours)

by Sean Sweeney

With the Paris Accord, our collective understanding of the task in front of us is clear. The Accord acknowledges the need for global warming to stay “well below 2 degrees Celsius” and states that efforts should be made to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. However, the ‘intended nationally determined contributions’ (INDCs) that lie at the heart of the agreement—even if they are fully achieved—will set the world on a pathway towards 2.7 – 3.5 degrees Celsius of warming (and that assumes a comparable level of ambition after 2030). The 1.5 degree Celsius threshold will therefore be breached long before the Agreement’s 2030 expiration date. Thus the Agreement acknowledges the scientific reality, and then institutionalizes “contributions” that are not even close to being consistent with that reality.

These simple facts have revolutionary implications. They should be enough to build a movement on their own, a movement to ensure that human economic activity stays within planetary limits, and that the shift is transformative, democratic and just.

Capital’s green shift never happened

But there are other facts about which we also need to be clear. It has been exactly a decade since former US Vice President Al Gore released his documentary on climate change titled An Inconvenient Truth. The same year, 2006, Sir Nicholas Stern (now Lord Stern) released a landmark study on the economics of climate change known as The Stern Review.

Both of these landmark statements—and countless others of lesser importance—expressed confidence in the idea that green entrepreneurship and the private sector would lead us to a greener and more ‘sustainable’ capitalism. A global price on carbon would drive innovation and a gradual but irreversible shift toward a low-carbon economy. Growth would not be interrupted; in fact, a new era of, in Stern’s words ‘better growth, better climate’ would commence.

And now, some facts. During the past decade, coal use has risen dramatically (and doubled since 1990) and oil and gas use has also increased steadily. More fossil fuels are being burned today than at any point in human history. In 2014, 89 million new cars and trucks were manufactured—up 16% since 2011—of which around only 700,000 were electric vehicles. An effective carbon price exists nowhere in the world. Emissions have risen 48% (2002–2012) and certain gases, like methane, have been underreported and their ‘global warming potential’ seriously underestimated. In 2013, CO2 levels reached 400 ppm; the highest level in millions of years.

Today many large corporations openly acknowledge that they cannot lead on climate change. They are held prisoner to the DNA of the system: defined by competition, the need to “make a return on investment” (profit), and to keep levels of consumption expanding. They have called on governments to create economic incentives, to ‘send signals’ to the investor community, to ‘establish a policy framework,’ to impose a ‘effective price on carbon’ in order to drive innovation.

Beware of the Official Optimism

Nevertheless, few representatives of capital are prepared to admit defeat – because this would amount to an ideological surrender. Instead, they create and sustain a wave of optimism that is not supported by the facts.

Desperate to assure everyone they have things under control, they point to the leveling off of CO2 emissions in 2014 and 2015 (during a period of economic growth). Falling coal consumption—2.7% globally in 2015—has made headlines; as has the sharp rise in renewable energy. This, alongside the slowing of energy demand, and improving energy efficiency (lower energy intensity), prompted Al Gore to say recently, “The momentum has shifted. We are winning.”

So, more facts: At the present annual rate – 36 billion tons emissions per year—the world’s ‘carbon budget’ will be expended by 2036. Therefore slowing or even halting the rise of emissions is simply not good enough. As for the renewable energy ‘revolution’ at the end of 2015, wind and solar PV combined generated just 4.6% of global electrical power. The percentage of electricity generated by fossil fuels—66% according to the IEA in 2015—has barely changed since 1990, while at the same time the volume of electricity generated has almost doubled.

Our Green Shift

Despite everything, we are in a good place. Facts like the ones cited above are not disempowering; they have helped launch a new movement, one that is connecting ecological and social challenges in one compelling narrative. Illusions in ‘the market’ still exist, but these illusions today stand on, appropriately, very thin ice.

Today some unions and social movements are thinking about how, together, we can reclaim economy as we build political power. As a medium-term goal, it will be necessary to clearly commit to a qualitative shift toward public and social ownership of key economic sectors, particularly electrical power generation, major transportation services, energy conservation, and food production, distribution, and retail. Local reclaiming is also important, including electricity transmission and distribution systems in order to advance energy conservation and renewable energy at the levels required.

Trade unions and workers’ organizations have an important role to play—as do new and reclaimed political parties (observe Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party in the UK.)

This approach needs to be grounded in the historical traditions of economic democracy, worker cooperatives, credit unions, etc. and it is these traditions that can now be deployed in the effort to reclaim the economy and protect human civilization from a barbaric future.

From the facts, we can create both a vision, a strategy, and plans for reclaiming and reorganizing economy at the community level to the global level, sweeping aside undemocratic trade and investment...
laws and providing platforms of cooperation between countries and regions.

Sean Sweeney is the Director of the International Program for Labor, Climate and Environment at City University of New York. He is also an activist with the organisation Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED - http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/sean-sweeney-writings-and-media/#), a global, multi-sector initiative to advance democratic direction and control of energy in a way that promotes solutions to the climate crisis, energy poverty, the degradation of both land and people, and responds to the attacks on workers’ rights and protections.

Lock the Gate:
A community based movement against climate change

by Drew Hutton

I have, for many years, argued that the ecological imperative had replaced class struggle as the most significant dynamic in modern industrial societies. This did not mean that other drivers of social change were not important, nor that there was anything deterministic about the way in which human societies were reacting to rapid and radical environmental impacts. However, I argued, the left would need to do more than “add on” the environment as one of its issues because modern industrial capitalism had caused such havoc with the natural environment that, just as workers have fought against a dehumanising system of production for the last 150 years, generations, beginning with the Baby Boomers, have had to fight to restrain a system of unbridled destruction of the natural environment.

All this does not mean our environmental campaigning should be limited only to environmental issues and ignore basic questions about the sources of the problem, about which industries and institutions need to be destroyed or radically transformed and what sorts of social alternatives do we want to replace them with. I have no time for the argument that we have to “smash” capitalism in order to address environmental destruction; I am more interested in getting successful outcomes from our environmental campaigns and often this necessitates a broad, community-based, contentious approach that resonates with some of our strongest values, not just our intellects or self-interest. Unfortunately, there is still a strong tendency in the conservation movement to be wary about linking environmental issues with those involving issues of social justice or democracy. Even more, there is a reluctance to mobilise in the community, especially those communities that are traditionally outside the usual constituencies that are open to progressive issues – like farmers.

My thinking on this has been strongly influenced by my experiences with the Lock the Gate campaign. This campaign has been so effective, especially in the regions, because it disrupts the populist right’s narrative about local communities being overridden by city-based, politically correct, metropolitan “elites” attempting to impose foreign concepts and rules on other communities and cultures. There are certainly many threats to folk in rural areas and many other “losers” in the emerging “new economy” from what they see as city-based elites but this can only be overcome by some among those elites, such as environmental activists, standing up for people and communities who are losing out as rapid and radical social change occurs.

Communities around Australia, faced with the threat of coal or unconventional gas, are in no doubt about where the main threat to their communities and their culture comes from and that is the big fossil fuel corporations and their major party backers who simply see them as collateral damage. Even more would see the banks in the same light for largely different but perfectly understandable reasons. There are many in regional Australia who are potentially comfortable with what Guy Rundle is calling “nativism” but who are now voting Green or progressive independent in this election. They needed the analysis provided by Lock the Gate (and their own intelligence) about where responsibility for the trauma being inflicted on them came from and they needed the clarity about strategic focus we provided to do what was necessary to win.

I am very impressed by the new, energised climate change movement, especially as represented by lively organisations like 350.org begun by my US friend, Bill McKibbon. However, I am concerned that many in the new movement will emulate mistakes from earlier campaigns, the main ones being an over-reliance on experts and rationality and the failure to develop a narrative that cuts through to the defence of laudatory community values (of which there are many) against the forces that are real threats. I am also concerned that movement leaders will argue that the threat of climate change is so great that we should not be worrying about what organisational forms come out of this struggle but directing our efforts into changing from fossil fuel-based energy systems into renewable ones. I understand the need for haste, which is why I support and practise non-violent direct action, and I don’t want us to be preoccupied by non-essential distractions but there are three reasons why I think the climate change movement needs to...
be about environmental justice and radical democracy, not merely about technologies.

Firstly, the success of the campaign and the rate of change will depend on the degree of community empowerment that occurs as a result of it and this, as I have always found, is in direct proportion to the amount of strategic clarity that guides it. The strategy that wins will usually have a clear idea of who the real enemies are, which industries have to be destroyed or transformed and which actions they undertake that will bring these about most effectively. This does not come from a bunch of scientists telling us what we have to do but from activists working in their communities using the community networks that already exist to discuss the ideas and generate many of the actions. Secondly, for the first time I can remember, technology is clearly in favour of the democratic and communitarian alternative. Solar PV and battery storage technologies are now becoming so prevalent and so inexpensive they are making neighbourhood and community-controlled energy systems viable. This is not to say there won’t be large wind and solar farms in the next few years but there could be a whole new social phenomenon in energy production that reinforces democratic values in a way that large, centralised, fossil fuel-based energy systems never could. Thirdly, who wants to spend years of their lives and enormous amounts of creative energy building a platform for a whole new generation of large corporations (albeit renewable energy ones) to dominate the political system?

Drew Hutton is a SEARCH member and was in 2011 elected president of the Lock the Gate Alliance, a national grassroots organisation made up of over 70,000 supporters and more than 250 local groups. He was one of the founders of the Australian Greens and has written widely on green politics and social movements.

Labor and environment: Key to 21st century Laborism

by Felicity Wade

There has been much discussion of Labor’s tentative embrace of traditional Labor economic territory at the July 2 election and its central role in Labor’s return to competitiveness.

Bill Shorten overtly criticised “trickle down” economics and named negative gearing as a tax-payer subsidy for property speculation. Opposing GST increases as a regressive tax on the poor, promising a Royal Commission on the banks and tightening up corporate tax dodging gave life to the often dull brand propositions we are hammered with at election time of “economic management” versus “education and health”. Labor’s mantras of education and health were grounded in an intellectual defence of the value of an egalitarian Australia and a bigger, more exciting story of sharing and building the wealth of our Commonwealth.

But equally striking was Labor’s return to the land of credible environment policy. This is the other aspect of Labor’s best modern Governments that was re-embraced by Labor in the lead up to the election.

Labor’s environment policy was the most comprehensive it has ever been. Its headlines were about climate action, including the commitment to shift to 50% renewable energy by 2030 and achieve credible carbon emission reductions over coming decades. It outlined the pathway to these goals, including reform of the electricity sector, closure of coal fired power stations and Federal intervention to halt land clearing.

But equally impressive was the commitment to revisit our Federal environment legal framework and the institutions that support it. With the business community complaining about the current laws’ and their bureaucratic demands and the continuing plummeting of all Australia’s environmental indicators, it seems fair to conclude the regime is failing. Most Australians would like assurance that Federal environment laws can stop kookaburras, magpies and other wild creatures disappearing from our experience. Labor promised to go back to first principles and consider a system that works better not only for developers but for the natural assets the laws are charged with protecting. This is a once in a generation reform.

As far as I can see, this is the policy prescription that has the most chance of halting expansion of the fossil fuel industry. I am not ready to rely on the optimistic hope that we have hit an irreversible period of decline in prices that will curtail new projects. The environment laws we depend on currently make no mention of climate change. A well designed new legal and institutional framework could supply some rational grounds and legal avenues for arguing against and actually stopping environmentally destructive development.

Other highlights of Labor’s policy included a doubling of funding for Indigenous Rangers, the most successful indigenous employment program that not only provides culturally appropriate work but impressive biodiversity outcomes and progressing World Heritage listing for Cape York, West Kimberley and the Aboriginal cultural connections in the Daintree. I find Reef Rescue packages a little hard to get excited about. I imagine a coastline full of agriculture and urban development puts pressure on that system that any number of billions of dollars of cash is going to struggle to address, but the $500 billion that Labor earmarked for the Reef is a serious contribution and greater regulation for unconventional gas provides pause on this untested industry.

Lean activists supporting action for renewable energy targets

by Felicity Wade

The regime is failing. Most Australians would like assurance that Federal environment laws can stop kookaburras, magpies and other wild creatures disappearing from our experience. Labor promised to go back to first principles and consider a system that works...
By reclaiming the environmental heritage alongside the egalitarian frame, Labor stepped back into the realm of the party which created the great coalition of progressive forces that changed Australia under Whitlam and Hawke.

However, unlike the 80s when saving environmental icons, like the Daintree or Antarctica were worthy but isolated pursuits, climate change reaches beyond environment into all aspects of government and the economy. As Labor more confidently imagines and articulates an agenda for a more equitable, less madly market driven society, the climate imperative of retooling our energy sector provides the perfect opportunity for Labor to deliver a 21st century social democratic, nation-changing reform.

The decarbonisation of our energy sector has many of the key economic debates of the last 20 years at its heart. Firstly, it is big: an economic and environmental imperative and a key driver of our economy. It is currently dominated by monopolistic corporations with many of its assets having been gifted to the private sector by successive governments, including Labor ones.

We must decommission old industries and ensure their workers are redeployed in a just fashion. We must rebuild regional economies to support this.

Such massive changes will require central planning, the market will not rationally keep the lights on without serious government management and public ownership of new infrastructure must be considered.

This management must be delivered through cooperation between states and Federal governments, a true test of Federalism.

The reform also offers the possibility of reinvigorating high-end manufacturing, refocusing our international competitiveness, decentralising control and democratising ownership. All of this must be delivered while protecting consumers from price hikes.

What a great place to continue what Bill Shorten has begun and reimagine the Labor mission of a safe, exciting and fair Australia.

LEAN looks forward to the discussion with comrades from all corners of the left on how this is best achieved. Putting the genie of neo-liberalism back in the bottle is a challenging ask. Prescriptions from the middle of last century will not suffice. We need to think smart and campaign hard to create a fair, just, energy system that pushes beyond the neo-liberal frame toward a better society.

Felicity Wade is a long term environmental campaigner. She ran the Wilderness Society in NSW for over a decade and been in the middle of some of the state’s big environmental stoushes including the restructuring of the native forest industry and legislation to halt broad-scale land clearing. She is the National Convener of the Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN) a grassroots network of ALP members and supporters who celebrate Labor’s environmental legacy and campaign to ensure environment is central to its future.

It successfully campaigned for Labor to adopt a 50% renewable energy target for 2030 (http://www.lean.net.au/about_lean).

Frack-free NT:
Protecting the Northern Territory from Shale Gas Fracking

by Naomi Hogan

After a year of working of the Lock the Gate Alliance as the Northern Territory coordinator, Naomi Hogan shares some insights in working with community to build support for protecting land and water from fracking gasfields.

Environmental justice, while not described by anyone in those terms, is core to the values of most Territorians I’ve met. The resounding link that all people share across the Northern Territory is the value of precious water and a fierce determination to protect their land and culture from threats from profit-hungry fossil fuel companies.

From drinking water and food growing from groundwater bores, unique habitats and livelihoods dependent on fishing and tourism based on world-renowned and healthy rivers and iconic hot springs and rushing waterfalls - anything that could threaten water is looked upon with deep suspicion.

The risky reality of the shale gas fracking industry and its links to water contamination has become increasing clear around the world. In response, pastoralists, Traditional Owners, tourism operators and urban residents have been united and equally outspoken in opposition to fracking the NT.

The week before the NT election, more than 60 pastoral station owners placed an ad in the NT News calling on the incoming government to ban fracking. In the months leading up to that, hundreds of Indigenous and non-Indigenous locals marched together in unprecedented displays of unity at rallies in Borroloola, Katherine, Alice Springs, Darwin, and elsewhere across the Territory, demanding a Frack Free future for their region.

Unions, both in the NT and Internationally have also been strong allies to communities fighting fracking and many advocated for protection from fracking through their networks across the Territory and beyond. Unions NT signed onto the statement by Unions Against Fracking, arguing in line with emerging scientific reports that show fracking jobs are dangerous, short-lived FIFO jobs that do not build a community, and in the Territory would do little to build the economy.

Opposition to fracking was one of the most controversial, hot button issues in the NT election campaign. Grassroots organising in key seats both in the bush and in major centres like Darwin and Alice Springs galvanised people and had a significant impact on the election outcome. Yellow triangles went up on front fences everywhere. Community members ran stalls outside their local grocery store or at their local rural show. The network spread and new ways to grow constantly emerged.

The pro-frackers pushed back. The gas lobby paid to bring rolling TV ads into the lounge rooms of Territorians everywhere. The unpopular Country Liberal Party Government letter boxed the
population with misleading flyers about fracking. And thanks to the concerted community education work of hundreds of dispersed volunteers who had been doing information sharing of their own, the pro-fracking propaganda was shoved away in disgust.

The peer reviewed facts about the risks of fracking stuck and the deep concern for water protection resonated. In the face of the sobering realities on the impacts of shale gas fracking determined, diverse and brilliant people emerged from all walks of life to get involved with all they could offer.

Classic examples of campaign involvement include Nathan ‘whippy’ Griggs, the world record holder for the fastest and longest whip cracking effort, making a viral ‘cracking not fracking’ video (https://www.facebook.com/NathanGriggsAU/videos/1766052580296833/ ) And the campaign media launch from aboard a volunteer’s sunset cruise in the Darwin Harbour.

Indigenous leaders and community members travelled from remote reaches of the Northern Territory for days without a cent to their name, trusting the Lock the Gate team completely to work as a team to enable them to reach media, participate in conferences, parliamentary inquires and rallies.

A Darwin hairdresser used her beauty salon to screen the Lock the Gate Fractured Country film and hand out yellow No Fracking triangles to some of the most well to do people in the Territory. The mob from Protect Arnhem Land used their connections to film the incredible Stingray Sisters documentary – showing the world their inspirational fight to stop oil and gas fracking across Arnhem Land (http://www.1millionwomen.com.au/blog/meet-stingray-sisters-three-incredible-indigenous-women-protecting-their-community-fracking/ )

Remote pubs, service stations, hotels and shops displayed our signs and stickers, plus the sheer number of tradie utes getting around the Top End with their campaign stickers, proudly saying ‘No Fracking’ or ‘Fishing not Fracking’ highlights the support for environmental justice can turn up where you least expect it. Even workers in the oil and gas industry put yellow No Fracking triangles up on their front fences.

Our part time staff team and volunteers who travelled all hours and huge distances, sleeping on the ground beside their cars, investing their time, money and sometimes sanity in being available to reach people across thousands of kilometres.

It became clear that while race, class and demographics had much to do with where the harmful impacts of proposed fracking might fall, and who had access to decision-making rights about energy futures for the Territory, they also had much to do with who had the passion to contribute their skills, time and networks towards a goal of safe clean energy. Logistical barriers to participation were overcome with a commitment to inclusion and funding for remote work. People from every walk of life wanted to give 110% in the passion to contribute their skills, time and networks towards a goal of safe clean energy.

If I’ve learned anything, it’s to be blown over by people’s generosity and the passion they have for preserving their community, their water supply and their culture.

It was particularly humbling to be invited to march as a part of the celebration of Indigenous land rights at the recent 50-year commemoration of the Wave Hill Walk Off in Kalkaringi.

The words of Vincent Lingiari from 1966 rang true as thousands of people retraced the steps of the original walk off: “We want to live on our land, our way.”

That powerful sentiment is often voiced by Traditional Owners across the Territory. Land is ceremony ground, land is life and land is the future. Yet currently in the NT, gas fracking applications and licences loom large across 80% of the Territory, and even the Aboriginal Land Rights Act only gives the right to a 5-year moratorium from a circling gas company.

The people of the Territory have spoken. Fracking companies should not be able to stamp their gasfield plans over communities, over ceremony grounds and waterways. Communities want share and articulate their vision for country, and to work to make their vision become reality.

So, in response to community pressure over recent years, the NT Labor Party went into the election with a comprehensive moratorium position, which included a commitment to an immediate moratorium on all shale gas fracking, and then an independent scientific panel and community consultation process to determine whether there should be a permanent ban.

It’s an important start in government listening to Territorians. And of course, the challenge will be to keep elected representatives accountable. Yet success should look like empowered communities with a legal right to have the say on what happens in their region, through their common water resources and on their land.

There are many Territory people looking to the recent Victorian fracking ban as a glimmer of hope for what is possible: the permanent protection of their land and waters from the threat of invasive onshore fracked gasfields.

Communities will continue to do the work to strengthen their position, including alerting, surveying and uniting with neighbours to declare their communities gasfield free. They will hold the line to protect their water, and they will wait for Government to catch up with their vision, which is ultimately what happened in Victoria.

There is a long road to go over the next couple of years, to turn a moratorium into permanent constraints on fracking, but it’s an incredible step for the NT and adds to the national momentum that is now starting to build across Australia.

Families getting ready to march for a Frack Free future in Katherine (Photo by Jeff Tan).
Amy Gordon speaks to Geoff Evans about her work as a national campaigner with AYCC and SEED.

Who are you, what’s your background?
I am an Aboriginal woman. I’ve lived in Sydney all my life but my family is from Gooreng Gooreng country in Queensland.

I got involved in the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) in 2010, and was one of the few people who identified as Aboriginal. As we started to get involved more as Aboriginal people we became aware that it is Aboriginal people who are the people most likely to be impacted by extractive industries, including gas and coal mining, and climate change.

That is how SEED came about. We formed it so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could be leading the fights to protect their country, and link these fights with land rights and community wellbeing.

What motivates young people to get active in AYCC and SEED?

We see climate change as our fight because it is our generation that will be affected. What motivates people to action is that we focus on grassroots campaigns. Our campaigns aim to make communities more resilient, for example our support for campaigners in Port Augusta in South Australia involved working with the community to get Australia’s first solar thermal plant built there. It’s about making a transition, and building the sense of the community working together to make a stronger future.

Through AYCC and SEED we meet like-minded people, and learn from each other. Many young people feel traditional politics isn’t for them. It can make us feel disempowered but working together in our own organisations and in our own way we can create change.

What makes AYCC and SEED different?

SEED is one of the only groups in the environmental space led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and it’s important we are leading the fight. The environment movement tends to be white, middle class and lacks diversity. We are challenging that.

AYCC is young people. It is important young people have a voice.

So we are kind of like the same organisation and work together, for example to stop the proposed coal mines in the Galilee Basin in Central Queensland and to stop BP drilling for gas in the Great Australian Bight in South Australia. This collaboration makes us stronger. We are led by our grassroots members and have about 15 staff members across the country. We plan together with our grassroots members. They know what works and how to win.

How does AYCC and SEED use narrative to build campaigns?

We do something called ‘personal narrative’, where we use our own stories and lived experiences to connect to people. We talk about how things affect people on the ground and in our wider campaigns. When we do that other people can connect with our stories and see themselves in that story. It works better than confusing people with lots of stats and numbers.

How does the environmental justice frame (i.e. inequity due to race, class, gender, etc. in the distribution of environmental risks, safety and protection and inequity in procedures to guarantee these) relate to the work of AYCC and SEED?

In the last 3 years we’ve started to look at everything we do through the environmental justice lens. Climate change will affect the most vulnerable and the most marginal people and communities hardest. We use these other issues, e.g. protecting vulnerable people, creating jobs, and so on, as our way of looking at climate change. We do this to make sure we’re not doing anything that is against the communities we work in.

We have informal international connections with various youth climate coalitions around the world. SEED recently had a young Native American activist come over and talk about their fight against the Keystone XL pipeline (a 1,897km pipe proposed to run from the oil sands in Alberta, Canada south through the US. It was really great to hear example of how we are fighting the same fights as indigenous people all across the world.

[There is now another campaign that has mobilised thousands of Native Americans, from more than a hundred tribes, to camp out on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, which straddles the border between the Dakotas, along the Missouri River to protest plans for a proposed oil pipeline that they say would contaminate the reservation’s water. They’re calling themselves protectors, not protesters.]

AYCC is seen as a predominantly non-Aboriginal organisation while SEED is an Aboriginal organisation – what is critical for these organisations successfully work together?
There is a lot of communication. AYCC volunteers work to make sure they are working in solidarity with SEED. We have oppressive structures in society that have caused climate change so it is about us trying to break down those structures in the way we work together. It is essential for SEED to have a voice to break down those power structures.

We don’t have a formal program of cultural awareness but we have a strong skills training program in AYCC so it is built in, for example when we run anti-oppression workshops generally.

What does success look like? What have been the critical success factors in building and sustaining the alliances been forged across the diverse groups supporting AYCC and SEED campaigns?

It is when many groups working together using our strengths that each organisation has combining together. For example, in the Galilee and Reef campaign, when it looked like Adani’s Carmichael coal project was going to be opened up and this was going to blow Australia’s carbon budget it was critical to bring the Wangan and Jagalingou people Aboriginal people into the campaign. Together we built a powerful alliance around shared goals and it now looks more likely the project won’t go ahead.

Defence of Country is an umbrella for Aboriginal campaigns to protect environment and culture together – what does organising around culture bring to environmental justice campaigns?

Organising around environment and culture together highlights the problem that mining is having on our country. Culture is being destroyed by mining companies, as well as land, when they come in and take the profits without communities seeing any benefits, only harm.

We are working in Borroloola in the NT on the gas pipeline proposed to go from Tennant Creek through Borroloola to Mt Isa and into Queensland. SEED provides help to communities by raising awareness of the impacts that mining is having on land and people. This made fracking one of the top issues in the recent NT election. We ‘ll keep working with those communities.

We have to see environment and culture as one. There is a lot of work to do in the wider environmental movement to bring thinking and campaigns around environment and culture together. There is no culture without an environment. We need to work in a way that communities can live on their land without the environment being destroyed. They cannot be seen separately and must be talked about together. We need to bring them together to achieve social justice.

You were on the 50th Anniversary and re-enactment of the Wave Hill Walk-off – what inspired you, and what did you learn that you will take into your next campaign work?

The most powerful moment for me was when we had just finished the walk and there was a group of elders who had done the original walk and had just done the re-enactment walk. It was so inspiring to see how proud the elders were of what they had done and the fight they still have for their rights. Change is a long journey and it’s really important to remember the fights of the past and to soak that in. We need to take stock of past wins and learn from them, and learn from other people’s experiences.

Some of Vincent Lingiari’s granddaughters spoke and so did Eddie Mabo’s daughter. They were strong powerful people who have changed Australia for the better. I look at these women as inspiration.

What do you hope for AYCC and SEED in the future?

In 5-10 years time I’d love to see us continue to take on the big power structures and fossil fuel companies - even more powerfully than we do today. I hope we will continue to be a real force to be working with.
Environmental campaigners in Australia have long relied on a time honoured formula for winning campaigns. Identify a problem, develop policy and a campaign that targets metro communities, then build enough electoral power to force the government of the day to adopt a particular position.

Over the past decade, the election of highly ideological Liberal/National governments across a number of states and at the federal level has changed the political terrain profoundly, with traditional avenues for gaining outcomes becoming much more limited. Because of their ideology, these governments have tended to lock out or ignore environmental organisations. There has also been a growing sense that with the looming crisis of climate change, we simply hadn’t mobilised a diverse enough cross section of the community to be able to win on key issues like the transition from coal and gas to renewables or coal exports.

As a result, new forms of grassroots organising and campaigning have developed in recent years, that link the environment movement and allies in the broader community. The Lock the Gate movement is probably the best known of these.

The campaign in Victoria

It was clear that the Coalition was going to run an anti environment agenda once elected to power in Victoria in late 2010. They quickly gutted the emission reduction targets in the Climate Change Act, enacted the world’s most restrictive anti-wind energy laws, and started to talk up prospects of a coal export industry. They were actively hostile to the environment movement.

Faced with a lock out by the government, we knew we needed to do something new. As a progressive organisation, Friends of the Earth (FoE) had long campaigned with unions, students organisations, traditional owners and other allies. Given the shift in the political landscape, it was time to broaden out our alliances. In 2009, FoE had aligned itself with farmers who had opposed the North South pipeline, which was built to deliver water from the inland rivers of the Murray darling to augment Melbourne’s water supply. But now a new threat to the climate, farming and water was emerging.

An ever growing proportion of the state was being covered in licenses for new coal or various forms of unconventional gas. Friends of the Earth started to focus on opposing new greenfield coal and gas proposals in 2010. The campaign went through three key phases, each of which built on the previous one, with each building deeper connections with our allies while increasing political power. These stages were:

Putting the issue of unconventional gas drilling ‘on the map’ through an initial ‘CSG roadshow’ featuring Drew Hutton of Lock the Gate

‘Following the licenses’: mobilising local communities to oppose individual license applications for new coal and gas as they were put forward

When this proved un successful (exploration applications were approved as a routine matter), we adopted the ‘gasfield free’ organising model developed by Annie Kia and others in northern NSW.

The gasfield free model was based on a simple proposition: to build community consensus that the gas and coal industries are not welcome in local areas. Each local group that formed started to door knock their neighbourhood around the simple question: ‘do you support our community declaring itself (coal or gasfield free – depending on the threat). Support was overwhelming, with an average of 94% support across the state.

Eventually 75 regional communities had declared themselves coal or gasfield free.

With a state government that was actively promoting the development of new fossil fuel projects, this withdrawal of social licence sent ripples through the political landscape. FoE worked to support and strengthen local groups, and helped co-ordinate two regional groupings that brought all the local initiatives together to discuss strategy and shared action. From its inception, the campaign was not a simply NIMBY reaction. Solidarity with other regions was at the heart of local action. Groups tended to ‘look up’ towards the state government (where decisions are ultimately taken).

Once they had completed their door knocking, local groups held public events to declare themselves gasfield free, such as a giant human sign on the 90 Mile Beach. They pressured local Councillors (10 Councils eventually came out and opposed onshore gas), they held protests, shadowed MPs and candidates, and generated several thousand news items in regional media. They proposed motions at the conference of the Victorian Farmers Federation which then helped tip the Coalition on the issue.

The campaign started out being focused strongly on coal seam gas (CSG) but quickly broadened to include all onshore gas drilling...
Communities declare themselves ‘gasfield–free’

New voices

This style of campaigning has mobilised thousands of people who have not previously been active on environmental issues. It has proved to be incredibly successful. In Victoria, the onshore gas drilling industry has been stopped by community opposition since 2012. In August 2016, the Andrews government announced a permanent ban on all onshore gas drilling and fracking.

However, there is another way of looking at the benefits of this style of campaigning. The gasfield free organising model, based on bringing small rural and regional centres together in opposition to a threat, also inherently builds a sense of cohesion and connection in communities. This is because diverse members of the community need to find common cause and identify viable ways for them to work together. It helps people to articulate their vision for their preferred option for their community, and builds their agency to work towards that outcome. It weaves together a range of concerns, including public health, concern about the environment, the value of activities like farming and tourism, sense of place and appreciation of community, as well as concerns for ground water and climate change. By virtue of the fact that multiple strands of interest and concern are involved, strong bonds and friendships are able to be built because there are multiple points of commonality.

What about environmental justice?

Rural communities are suffering pressures from all sides. Price squeeze from the supermarkets, the vagaries of food production in an ever globalised world, with a corresponding race to the bottom in terms of pricing, and cut backs in services and government support. Factor in the impacts of climate change and you have communities who are being squeezed to the margins.

Leaving aside the development of the Landcare movement, farmers have not been the natural allies of the generally left-of-centre, urban focused environment movement. In this sense the new ‘site resistance’ movements against new coal and gas are welcome and heartening on many levels. For Victorian campaigners, now that we have a permanent ban, the next – and possibly most difficult stage – in the campaign will be to forge new campaigns on new issues with the thousands of people who were mobilised through the coal and gas campaigns.

On the other hand, here in Victoria, many relationships were not progressed or deepened through this campaign. Engagement with traditional owner groups was, at best, light. Some unions, notably the Australian Workers Union (AWU) entered the fray late in the campaign, arguing against the ban. Yet the Victorian Trades Hall supported the moratorium.

In February 2016, FoE organised a ‘grow renewables, ban gas’ rally outside parliament on the first sitting day. This was a conscious attempt to bring together both ends of our campaign – the Yes 2 Renewables project and the Coal and Gas Free Victoria umbrella. The speakers at this event included Wendy Farmer of Voices of the Valley (representing front line communities in the Latrobe Valley), Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN), the Shadow Minister for Renewables (a Liberal MP), the secretary of Trades and Labor Council, two Greens MPs, a sheep farmer and a worker from the wind sector.

To my mind this demonstrates what is possible with these new forms of campaigning. In many ways there is nothing new under the sun: there are clear parallels to the ‘Green bans’ campaigns of the early 1970s or the alliance-focused campaign to stop the Jabiluka uranium mine. But engaging with generally conservative rural communities is a significant move for the environment movement.

This campaign has won a historic victory, one that hopefully will set precedents for other states and territories.

Throughout this six-year campaign, I have been constantly reminded that there is a deep loss of faith in the institutions that are generally seen as being ‘for’ rural communities – especially the Farmer’s Federation and the National Party. There is concern about ‘free’ trade agreements. There is anger at the continual cuts to services (from closure of bank branches to loss of hospitals). There is a growing sense that the land itself is changing, whether or not people are willing to use the words climate change. By running alliance based campaigns (often described by our opponents in the fossil fuel industry as being ‘populist’ or ‘fear mongering’) we have started to build deep connections where previously there was distrust. There is a space for a non-ideological voice from the Left, one that understands the value of community and land, one that is willing to challenge corporate power and profit gouging. One that offers solutions that are not just based on fear and scapegoating. At this point we have the tail end of a successful campaign. The real work will start if we are able to articulate a better vision for the future and a meaningful pathway to get there.

Cam Walker is campaigns coordinator with Friends of the Earth in Melbourne. He has several decades as an activist, with a focus on climate change issues in recent years.

Communities declare themselves ‘gasfield–free’
Climate change: how to win

by David McKnight

Climate issues barely featured in the 2016 federal election even though it occurred after some of the most dramatic illustrations of climate change, including widespread coral bleaching on the Barrier Reef and unprecedented hot days. Try as they might, the political forces who recognize the danger of climate change were unable to force this issue onto the public agenda during the campaign.

I believe this points to deeper strategic and political problems in the climate movement which must be addressed.

The main strategic flaw is that even those who are aware of the radical threat posed by climate change often underestimate it and the nature of the massive transformation needed to deal with it. Too often, the strategic perspective of the climate movement is one of simply convincing a sympathetic government to change a policy. This woefully underestimates what is involved. A better way of conceiving of the situation is that climate change is an epochal challenge of historic dimensions. In some ways it is like the impact of the first phase of the expansion of industrial capitalism in the 19th century. Strategically, the impact of this upheaval lead to the creation of a broad labour movement aiming to tame capitalism (or overthrow it, as Marxists argued). A broadly shared perspective on the need for economic equality and against the power of the wealthy defined this movement.

I think we need to conceive of our present situation in somewhat similar terms. That is, we need to develop a strategic perspective of building a broad mass movement to respond to the radical threat of climate change. As with the early labour movement this includes a variety of tactics (civil disobedience and radical actions well as more traditional mass action) grass roots and local actions as well as national actions. Such a mass movement would also include different political positions.

But the most relevant observation in this comparison between the early labour movement and the movement around climate and the environment is that the latter has a long way to go in building itself into a powerful, national force which change the political agenda, create social change and challenge the power of the fossil fuel industries and their allies. I’d like to address some of these weaknesses.

As it stands, the environment movement consists of very diverse organisations. Some are big, some small; some local, some national; some with paid professional staff and some relying on volunteers.
While diversity can be a strength, the other side of the coin is that this multi-faceted movement is hugely fragmented. And this organizational fragmentation is accompanied by fragmentation in action. That is, there is no mechanism to mobilize national political action. This was tragically illustrated when the Abbott government in 2013-14 systematically wrecked all the climate-related advances made by Labor and the Greens. The environment movement held a few scattered protests but was powerless to respond in a way that threatened the government. By contrast, the public reaction against the cuts of the first (2014) budget – largely organized by the trade union movement and the Left -- quickly became a powerful force in the national landscape.

Another problem which shows the weakness of the existing environment movement is its unspoken assumption that if we show the danger of continuing to burn fossil fuels, then ultimately governments will be convinced to act. But being right is not enough. That’s because the powerful lobby of fossil fuels corporations and their allies are not interested in what is right but in their own self-interest. Being right is important of course, but it must be backed by a powerful social force. That is, a very significant section of the community, must actually take some sort of sustained public action. This has been the case in every other historic change and it will be here. And this means much more than achieving good public opinion polls or signing online petitions.

The limits of local activism

Linked to this is another problem which can be broadly described as the limitations of a strategy of activism. All successful social changes begin with committed activists, but to succeed the situation must go beyond this. Today the activist outlook in the environment movement concentrates on multiple, small-scale campaigns or dramatic actions by the committed. These are fine as far as they go but there is no orientation to finding a form of political action that involves ordinary people with jobs and responsibilities. This leaves supporters in the general public with nothing to do but watch and applaud. The other side of the activist coin can be the passivity of their supporters in the broader public who cannot be activists.

Of course it doesn’t have to be this way. Sometimes activists see their role as one of building a broadly based movement, which allows a place for advanced or local actions as well as mass mobilizations on a national scale.

Another issue I want to address concerns the tendency to portray fighting climate change as a leftwing cause and to argue that the problem is capitalism. I don’t think it is factually correct to say that capitalism is the cause of climate change. We are all aware of the horrendous environmental actions which occurred under state ownership in the USSR. The main effect of this characterisation is to repel potential supporters and narrow the movement. To people outside the Left this can sound like a way of smugging an old agenda into the ‘new’ agenda of climate. (Like the orthodox Marxists who once tried to claim that gender and race are really simply issues of class.) Obviously we do and must talk about restructuring the economy and regulating it and especially attacking fossil fuel corporations. But this is not the same as loose talk about overthrowing capitalism.

We need a coalition

So I think our main strategic priority is to build a broad, non-partisan national coalition of all groups concerned with climate change. Such a coalition must be more than environmental groups and include trade unions, religious groups, students, and all kinds of concerned citizens, including some conservatives and business people.

To build such a coalition we need to point out that particular communities are vulnerable (eg. Indigenous communities in remote Australia) but overwhelmingly our appeal needs to be framed in terms of how everyone will be affected. That is, we need a mass perspective. We also need a set of demands which are capable of appealing to the broadest possible range of people while still demanding meaningful action from governments. This means a set of demands framed around the promotion of renewable & clean energy and opposition to any new coal mines or gas drilling.

To build such a coalition you need people to lay aside differences in the hope of building something bigger and more powerful because it is united. This should not be merely an agreement among peak organizations – for example the ACTU and the Australian Conserve Foundation. Rather, it must be a genuine coalition for change that is built on the local level by community leaders with grassroots action.

In my view the best place to begin this process is by refreshing the coalition that created the successful Peoples Climate Marches in late 2015. The PCM in the end had over 200 partners in the community and proved that both grassroots groups and major organizations can work together, as well as providing common ground for those who are politically divided (Labor and Greens for example). The PCM was not perfect but its success provided a solid foundation to build an even bigger and more powerful movement.

David McKnight is a SEARCH member and an honorary Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales. He is the author of four books on topics diverse as contemporary politics, the news media, recent Australian history and international espionage. David also contributes regularly to the opinion pages of Australian newspapers.
The Change Agency: Learning to build and exercise community power

by James Whelan

Powerful movements mobilise communities around shared values. From the civil rights movement in the United States to worker rights campaigns in Australia, community organising has been at the heart of countless winning campaigns. But social movements don’t happen by accident. Reflection, dialogue and training play a critical role in translating concern and passion into sustained and strategic social action.

The Change Agency is a social movement education and training initiative based in Australia. Our approach has been shaped by Miles Horton’s work with the Highlander Research and Education Centre in Tennessee, Paulo Freire’s ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ and Saul Alinsky’s ‘Rules for Radicals’. Like Freire and Horton, we’re committed to popular education built from the experience and struggles of the folks we work with.

Since 2005, we’ve led workshops with thousands of activists working in hundreds of campaigns and organisations throughout Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Our website is an ever-evolving library with more than 3,000 resources that include practical how-to guides, campaign case studies, action research and training resources developed by, with and for campaigners.

To strengthen the climate justice movement, we partnered with the Sierra Club, Nature Conservation Council of NSW and the Sunrise Project to develop our six-month Community Organising Fellowship. The Fellowship equips community organisers with the skills they need to build community power. It’s tailored for campaigners with political experience who are actively involved in supporting community leaders, identifying widely-held values and interests, building alliances and coalitions, strategising, building and channeling community power.

The Fellowship’s first cohort of 25 campaigners from around Australia gathered in Sydney in February 2014 for an intensive 10-day residential workshop that included sessions on relational organising, translating online activism into community action, campaign strategy, social movement dynamics and team building. This was followed by three four-day workshops and monthly mentoring sessions with seasoned campaigners. Now in its third year, the Fellowship has trained 75 skilled organisers to support community campaigns around Australia – an incredibly diverse group of grassroots leaders and NGO staff from 19 to 75 years old, working in urban and rural settings. Our graduates are working behind the scenes to accelerate the transition to renewable energy, resist coal mines and gasfields, protect the Great Barrier Reef, increase Australia’s foreign aid and build and support scores of other environmental justice campaigns.

The Fellowship draws on community organising models from the United States, including Saul Alinsky’s seminal organiser training with the Industrial Areas Foundation, Marshall Ganz’s work on personal narrative, and the snowflake model integral to the success of Barrack Obama and Bernie Sanders’ networked campaigns. But, equally, we’re inspired by the methods employed in powerful Australian movements: Lock the Gate and the ‘gasfield-free’ approach to building community resistance, Wave Hill and contemporary campaigns for Aboriginal Land Rights, the Green Bans movement and more recent union-led and coalition-based campaigns. The curriculum blends social action skills with big picture political analysis, attending to the pragmatic work of recruitment, base-building and digital campaigning while creating space to explore movement dynamics, sustainable activism and the potential of civil resistance.

To help build a culture of learning in social movements the Change Agency is publishing the ‘People Power Manual’, a collection of six training guides for activists, organisers and activist educators. The first instalment, our Campaign Strategy Guide, contains process guides, handouts and outlines to facilitate participatory workshops. Launched in 2015, the guide is now being put to use in more than 20 countries. The second to be published is the Community Organising Guide, which will be launched this November during the Organise conference in Sydney.

Our not-for-profit work is supported by a circle of funders and donors. Drop me a line to learn more about the Change Agency, our Fellowship and other projects, to donate or to explore potential collaboration.

http://www.thechangeagency.org

James Whelan is an activist educator committed to building powerful social movements that bring about social and environmental justice. James has worked with small and large civil society organisations including Greenpeace, Amnesty International and the Wilderness Society on campaigns to protect forests, promote clean air and uphold human rights. James is a director of the Change Agency (http://www.thechangeagency.org ). He lives in Newcastle.

Community Organising fellows reflect deeply on their campaigns to integrate new frameworks, tactics and ideas.
Does strategic community organising create and lead sweeping social change? Or does social change momentum arrive from disruptive actions and sweep individuals and organisations along with it? This is the question tackled by US labour, civil rights and immigration rights activist brothers Paul and Mark Engler’ *This is an Uprising*; the answer, of course, is ‘both’.

*This is an Uprising* is an analysis of social change, how it has occurred, and how contemporary campaigners may make it occur again. It is being widely read and discussed among Australian climate activists. Using various 20th century case studies, including Martin Luther King’s civil rights campaign in Birmingham, the overthrow of Milosevic in Serbia, the marriage equality campaign, the Arab Spring and climate activism, the authors contrast different approaches to social change and identify the critical role of nonviolent civil resistance. In doing so they aim to draw out lessons and ideas that might be generalised and applied by contemporary campaigners.

One of the Englers’ key focuses is the putative tension between organising and mobilising. They examine this tension by contrasting two seminal thinkers. One, Saul Alinsky, championed “the slow, incremental building of community groups”, through relationships, leadership, and structures. The other, Frances Fox Pivens, argued in favour of “unruly broad-based disobedience, undertaken outside the confines of any formal organization”, with the view that mass protest could rapidly draw in and mobilise previously disengaged citizens. The Englers own view is that both are necessary: “The future of social change in this country may well involve integrating these approaches— figuring out how the strengths of both structure and mass protest can be used in tandem— so that outbreaks of widespread revolt complement long-term organizing.”

*This is an Uprising* does justice to this sentiment. It provides a reasonable assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and an analysis of how and when they can be used most effectively. Frustratingly, however, the authors seem transparently inclined towards the latter approach, despite their stated preference for an ‘integrated approach’. Further, they come across as claiming that an integrated approach is something novel that they have developed, despite the emphasis accorded to mobilisation by other modern organisers such as Marshall Ganz whose work on the Obama campaign pioneered the integration of relational organising with electoral mobilising. But whether or not we agree with the authors, or like their style of argument, the discussion is educational and provides many useful object lessons to help develop our own ideas, for example the relationship between transactional smaller gains and transformational, revolutionary change.

*This is an Uprising* has great value in its detailed discussion of civil resistance and strategy for change. By “civil resistance”, the authors broadly mean the use of nonviolent direct action in the creation of a mass uprising: they give examples of the Civil Rights Movement with its street marches and lunch-counter sit-ins, as well as Gandhi’s salt march. In this sense the idea of “civil resistance” is inclusive of the sorts of direct action we have seen in Australia such as strikes, the Green Bans, and blockades of forest clearing or coal mining and export. However, civil resistance as the Englers describe it implies a shift away from action intended to prevent, say, a forest being cleared, and towards more symbolic actions primarily intended to grow majority public support.

Building upon this, the Englers illuminate the role of civil resistance in past social movement successes. They link it with the concept of Moyer’s ‘Movement Action Plan’, and explain how civil resistance can feed into longer-term power-building. They identify three particular elements that occur “time and again” in effective uprisings: disruption, sacrifice, and escalation. As we consider questions of social movement strategy, the discourse on civil resistance prompts us to reflect and question ideas about the role of civil resistance in creating change.

The enthusiasm for this book amongst Australian climate activists comes as no surprise. Since the collapse of the Copenhagen climate talks in 2009, there has been a growing recognition of the need both to win more public support and to build a lasting power base to push for action on global warming. Complementing this, there has been an increased intensity of civil resistance, from the iconic and enduring Maules Creek blockade, to the recent mass action at the Newcastle coal port, ‘Breakfree’. Wins, such as the success of the
The term 'Anthropocene' arose from Earth System science and has been widely adopted across the social sciences and humanities. It references "the very recent rupture in Earth history arising from the impact of human activity on the planet as a whole.1" In this 'Age of Humans' our species is outstripping the Earth System's capacity to maintain conditions conducive to many forms of life. Our impacts are pushing the Earth System towards rapid, unpredictable and potentially catastrophic state changes beyond the evolutionary experience of both humans and many other species.

Through sheer weight of numbers and our extraordinary adaptive capacity, humans have invaded almost every ecological niche on the planet and forced most other species into an unequal competition for habitat and critical environmental resources.

While the Industrial Revolution began the rapid expansion of a powerful, increasingly globalised, techno-industrial civilisation based on the exploitation of fossil fuels, it was the 1950s that saw the start of 'the Great Acceleration' – exponential growth in energy use, resources exploitation, industrial output, hyper-consumption, population, eco-system disruption, the unleashing of nuclear power, and a tsunami of fossil-fuel based plastics and chemicals and intractable waste into the environment.

'Anthropocene' is a powerfully integrative concept. It draws together our thinking about specific aspects of Earth System disruption — like climate change or biodiversity loss or ocean acidification — to focus on their interconnections and their economic, social and cultural drivers at the core of the dominant globalised mono-culture. By directing our attention to whole system dynamics, it encourages us to see the Earth as a single socio-ecological system.
However, as Clive Hamilton has argued:

“Much of the literature on the Anthropocene – its essential idea, its causes, its starting date – is bedeviled by readings of the new concept through old disciplinary lenses, readings that fail to understand the revolutionary implications of humankind taking the Earth into a new geological epoch.”

Both scholars and activists must set aside their disciplinary and historically-bound world views to consider the implications of human impacts on the entire Earth System.

The Anthropocene concept has far-reaching ethical implications. It challenges us to accept an expanded understanding of collective responsibility that reaches beyond conventional human scales measured in multiples of human lifetimes, to consider the consequences of our collective actions on planetary and geological (or deep time) scales.

Justice and the Earth-System

All notions of justice are rooted in ethics. In conventional usage justice is about the impartial adjudication of conflicting claims, the upholding of rights according to law, and the recognition of accepted standards of fairness. It is closely linked to ideas of equity: equal access for all members of a society to economic and social benefits and resources. This notion has been extended to include, in the words of the 1996 US Presidential Council on Sustainable Development, “equal opportunity in a safe and healthy environment”.

Environmental Justice recognises that environmental problems such as waste sites, enclosure of the environmental commons, and toxic gas emissions, are more commonly seen in poor, working-class, and minority communities. For those with power and influence who don’t live with these realities each day, such problems are “out of sight, out of mind”.

However, for many activists and scholars the Environmental Justice approach has given way to EcoJustice that argues more broadly that the failure to acknowledge the consequences of unfettered growth is an injustice to life itself.

North American environmentalist, educator and author C.A. Bowers argues that EcoJustice requires us to look at our collective predicament in a critical way which excludes the current hegemonic mind-set of social justice liberals whose thought patterns are based on some of the same assumptions as market liberals. Social-justice and market liberals share the same deep rooted cultural values about progress based on individualism and human exceptionalism that places us outside of and above ‘nature’ with a self-ordained first call on the Earth’s resources.

The arrival of the Anthropocene renders this approach dangerously obsolete. Now we must face up to the ethical challenge not only of how environmental damage disproportionately affects marginalized communities but to the disruption of the whole Earth System’s capacity to maintain favourable conditions for life in general.

A values framework for the Anthropocene

As we set about preparing for the long-haul of the Anthropocene we need to radically rethink the core values that underpin our notions of justice and equity. The following four principles are offered as a starting point for this reconsideration.

1. Earth sovereignty

Sovereignty is a foundational concept for our systems of jurisprudence and international relations. But its expressions in the sovereignty of the nation state since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the sovereignty of the individual according to some readings of the US Constitution of 1787 have become inimical to the viability of our own species and many others as well.

A new conception of sovereignty vested in the Earth and asserting the preeminence of respect for all life and the integrity of the Earth System has become a necessity. Such a definition of Earth sovereignty as prior to and more fundamental than human agency would provide a basis on which to reframe all our doctrines of authority, justice and responsible governance.

2. Eco-mutuality

Eco-mutuality is a core relational principle that recognises the need to nurture and sustain a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship as the very basis of human cultures. It incorporates the principle of equity but extends it beyond the sphere of social relations to embrace our inter-dependence with all living creatures and the eco-systems of which they are an integral part.

Eco-mutuality transcends the essentially anthropocentric and utilitarian concept of sustainability to recognise the intrinsic value of all life forms within the socio-ecological wholeness of the Earth System.

Global Wealth Inequality

Extreme global wealth disparity: The Great Acceleration has delivered unimaginable wealth to a tiny global minority at immense cost to the overwhelming majority and to the life support systems of the planet. Oxfam has recently calculated that the number of hyper-wealthy individuals who could fit into a London bus (85) control as much wealth as nearly half the Earth’s human population (the poorest 3.5 billion). Such extreme wealth disparity has never been seen before.
3. Holism

Holism is an epistemic principle that emphasizes the intrinsic coherence of complex systems and their emergent properties that cannot be understood from a knowledge of their parts. It implies that the system as a whole determines in important ways how the parts behave, even while the parts condition the nature of the whole.

As an approach to inquiry, learning and action, holism does not displace other modes of knowing but transcends them and opens the door to a more creative engagement with change in complex systems at all levels from the micro-organic to the social to the planetary.

4. Eco-social resilience

Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disruption and reorganize itself under conditions of turbulence and ongoing change. Eco-social resilience must be a core organizing principle for the Anthropocene transition. It establishes eco-systemic integrity as a fundamental design criterion for human technologies, economies, habitats and systems of governance.

Eco-social resilience focuses attention on the critical relationship between human systems and the eco-systems in which they are embedded and on whose vitality they ultimately depend. Within this context it values the preservation, enhancement, and ultimate unity of both social and ‘natural’ capital and favors distributed networked technologies with localized capability and control instead of centralized, capital intensive systems.

Humankind’s alienation from Earth and our rending of its precious web of life begets modernity’s ethical malaise and the many fundamentalist reactions against it. The Anthropocene calls us to rediscover a deeper purpose in our collective presence to the Earth, a purpose that transcends the sterile materialism of techno-industrial society and the moral bankruptcy of its neo-liberal apologists.

Kenneth McLeod has been involved in change processes in organisations, communities and social action movements since the late 1960s. Ken was a leading opponent of Australian involvement in the American war of aggression in IndoChina as NSW Convenor of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign. Through the TransNational Co-operative which he founded in the mid 70s he was involved in educational and research roles with trade unions, community organisations and solidarity movements. Ken has worked on policy regarding worker co-operatives and on industry, employment and in adult education programs in TAFE and universities. Ken is now the Convenor of the Anthropocene Transition Project at the UTS Business School in Sydney.
Re-examining Justice in the Anthropocene
All inequalities and injustices are exacerbated in the Anthropocene

by Sam Altman

Anthropocene related work includes developing teaching / learning projects where public aspects of Indigenous knowledges, are entangled with other forms of knowledge to create new knowledge assemblages to address living in the Anthropocene. These include projects in Ethics, Environmental Memory, Ethnomathematics, Transdisciplinarity and Food Sovereignty.

Anthropocene – The Age of humans:

A proposed term denoting the current geological age. The period during which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and other earth systems. Coined in 2000, this period is marked by global warming, widespread pollution, acidification of the oceans, mass extinctions and climate change.

Some historical roots of the Anthropocene:

Looking through the morality, ethics and justice lenses, the European Enlightenment period (17 & 18th centuries) is historically crucial (1) and especially one of its key features, namely the diminution of the sacred, the spiritual and the emotional in everyday life. These were deemed primitive, mysterious, and essentially irrational and so unscientific. This meant that they could be ignored in all sorts of ‘real world’ decision-making. It was also the time when there was the beginning of globalisation via colonisation and an early beginning of global warming. Scientific and technological ‘progress’ ensued and the modern world’s institutions and worldviews formed and became dominant. The Enlightenment also gave rise to struggles for what we think of as progressive ideas and motifs such as: liberty, reason, equality, decolonisation and self-determination. It also gives rise to the idea of individual personal freedom and imagining that humans are exceptional in the world and so free to act in the natural world without constraint.

The Great Acceleration post 1950 (2) (see graphic below) shows the current and future outcomes that specify the onset of the Anthropocene. Capitalism and its neoliberal manifestations - as well as the so-called forms of socialism in the Soviet Union and communist Chinese experience are all implicated.

We are only just starting to come to terms with just how radically disruptive in every sense of the word the Anthropocene and earth systems description really are. It is important to see that it represents a colossal failure of what is called Western scientific or rationalist thought and act accordingly. Assuming there is no room for denial, people in that intellectual mind-set often do not have the cognitive frameworks that can make sense of what could be done and so fall back on approaches that turn out to be part of the problem. (See Emily Scott quote below (3)). To move forward in what is now a profoundly unsafe, uncertain and interdependent world with contested ways of being, knowing and living, we need to re-examine our most fundamental assumptions about the meaning of life and all the historical, institutional and conceptual structures that they arise from. We need to identify features of our ethical thinking that determine and rationalise our actions such as binary thinking and replace them with an ethics more in keeping with living well in the Anthropocene.

Disrupting Binary Thinking

Western thought and action is dominated by inter-related sets of dualities. This world is imagined as being formed around fundamental binaries: culture/nature, man/women, mind/body, active/passive, civilized/savage, economy/environment and so on. Let’s be clear however it was not as if both sides of these binaries were ‘separate but equal’. They are understood as hierarchical, antagonistic (6) and associated with the domination of ‘nature’ by (human) ‘culture’, of ‘women’ by ‘man’ and so on. There is real power in these binaries since the dominations are seen as natural and unquestionable.

Traditional Western ethics, justice and morality all assume that these binaries are real. Centuries of on-going struggle have resulted in some significant overturnings of some of the associated oppression in some societies, however the binaries and especially the so-called natural hierarchy still tend to dominate. These binaries, basic to western thought at least since the Enlightenment, must collapse. At least the way they are used as powerful tools for oppression. They are no longer tenable in the Anthropocene where accepting that deep interdependence is a primary feature of life.

What does taking seriously the fact that humans are inextricably part of (embedded in, entangled with) eco-systems? That is that we are inside nature, that even though we have a form of self-perception we are not exceptional and that the laws of nature do apply to us. One response is that our ultimate fate doesn’t really matter, no matter how ‘unfair’ it seems. Uncounted numbers of species have gone extinct on this planet. Why should current species including ourselves be any different?

An alternative approach is to look to an ecological conception of justice ethics and morality.

But first there are justice issues in the very term “the Anthropocene”. While it has become widely accepted among many commentators, it is only useful if its contradictions and shortcoming are noted. These include:

- The term is too Universalist. Ignores and so devalues important differences in human populations such as gender and race with uneven power, uneven responsibility for the current situation, and who are unevenly privileged or negatively impacted.
- The term is too white (4). As planetary limits start to bite, powerful elites – mostly white, continue to dehumanise less powerful groups – mostly black and brown, so as to justify sacrificing their lives, communities and countries (5).
- The term demonstrates too little humility (6). Too anthropocentric a term, given that this attitude (anthropocentrism) gave rise to the
current situation, it seems particularly insensitive to be naming the current epoch this way.

**Justice as an Ecological feature**

In the Anthropocene we need an ecological approach to ethics to inform our ideas of justice and morality and so of our behaviour. Value, beauty, goodness and what is the right way to act needs to be informed by principles taken from how eco-systems operate and interrelate. Importantly this goes beyond how humans should act towards the environment. Such formulations of ecological ethics are binary-bound with humans still outside of the environment. Easy enough to say but cognitively difficult to enact. Here are some ecological principles

Deep interdependence means that previously exclusively human attributes such as sentience, consciousness, agency, aesthetics, responsibility, moral and legal standing etc. need to be re-examined and re-defined to see how non-humans (animals, plants, ecosystems, even individual rivers, mountains and trees) and other-than-humans (spiritual entities) also manifest these attributes. Most important it means being fully attentive to interconnections.

Interdependence means that the highest good is the continuing survival in the sense of dynamic co-evolution of an eco-system. That is, we need to understand and take care of the resilience, diversity and reproductive capacity of a system. This means that place-based knowledge and action in their regional and global contexts has high importance.

The purpose of living things is survival and reproduction within an eco-system. So living systems are intrinsically valuable. Which demands respect and reverence.

They are equally valuable so gives rise to another principle - Do No Harm. But this cannot be an absolute i.e. harming a living thing needs justification esp. feeding to live.

Eco-systems have limits and balances. For example, predators only take what they need to flourish. This then gives rise to the ethics of treading lightly – i.e. limit interactions to only what are necessary.

Other principles such as cultivating compassion and loving kindness are responses to suffering experienced by sentient beings of all sorts e.g. being prey. They are also associated with being responsible for your actions.

Taking responsibility for ecological consequences whenever and wherever we can. This starts with having a reparative mindset (in contrast to an extractive mind-set) where we acknowledge past and current damage and seek to stop and repair as much as we can.

In this context it is important to acknowledge with humility the basic truth that Indigenous people and other non-dominant cultural groups recognised and lived in accordance with many of these principles (6). In fact their knowledge systems and ways of life should be seen as a GIFT to the rest of us as we grapple with the onset of the Anthropocene.

*Sam Altman worked for over 30 years in Indigenous education. He developed working links with Indigenous people and communities across most of Australia. During that time he was involved in teaching, curriculum design and program coordination focusing on Indigenous education, community development and management.*
This bulletin is the first to be published by the Environmental Justice working group. We hope to produce another in the first quarter of 2017. We encourage readers to respond to what you’ve read in this bulletin with letters and also suggest topics for the next bulletin. Consider writing an article for it.

Here is what else you could do to get involved:

• Join SEARCH to receive newsletters updates, opportunities to participate in our discussions and actions.
• Help us organise more forums on environmental justice and social movement building issues
• Help us organise progressive breakfasts on environmental justice themes. Do you have a venue or speakers you’d like to suggest?
• Watch this space, via the SEARCH website.

For more information or further information about the SEARCH Environmental Justice working group, or to send us your thoughts and suggestions, email the editors.

Contact Geoff Evans at geoffrey.r.evans@bigpond.com
and Sam Altman at sam.altman@live.com.au

Cultivating Murder is also registered with the Documentary Australia Foundation where you can make a tax deductible donation. Here is a link to the project on the DAF webpage here.

We are keen to discuss our outreach/impact strategies for the film with potential supporters. If you are interested in working with us you can contact the producers at info@filmprojects.com.au.

The production is a co-production between Film Projects and Sensible Films. Director Gregory Miller has been shooting the film for over twelve months and is now editing.

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Film Projects and Sensible Films are proud to launch a Pozible campaign to raise funds for our new documentary feature Cultivating Murder.

Cultivating Murder is a documentary film about the tragic murder of NSW Dept of Environment officer Glen Turner by Moree farmer Ian Turnbull. The story highlights the tensions over illegal land clearing in regional Australia and the efforts of some large scale farmers to water down the Environment Protection Laws which protect native vegetation and critically endangered species.

Our crowd funding target is $25,000 and the money raised will be used for the project’s post production. Please support this very important film. Check out the film’s trailer and rewards on Pozible.