

Climate change and the next left

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Climate change is already happening. But the really bad news is that there's very strong evidence that capitalism will deliver a future of *catastrophic* climate change that will have far-reaching effects around the world, especially in the imperialized countries of the Global South. There is a vast gap between the continuing growth of greenhouse gas emissions and the massive reductions of emissions needed to prevent [widespread catastrophes](#).

In a thoughtful article, "[Revolution in a Warming World: Lessons from the Russian to the Syrian Revolutions](#)," Andreas Malm writes,

Lenin spoke of the catastrophe of his time as a 'mighty accelerator' bringing all contradictions to a head, 'engendering world-wide crises of unparalleled intensity,' driving nations 'to the brink of doom'... Climate change is likely to be the accelerator of the twenty-first century, speeding up the contradictions of late capitalism – above all the growing chasm between the evergreen lawns of the rich and the precariousness of propertyless existence – and expedit[ing] one local catastrophe after another.

In advanced capitalist countries, we could see even more aggressive attacks on public health care, education and social services as states cut there while they spend more in response to floods, droughts and other effects of climate change. It's easy to imagine mass international migration out of regions of the South hit hard by climate change leading to an intensification of racism and repression and the growth of fascist and other far right movements.

As more catastrophes happen and cause problems for capitalists and governments in advanced capitalist countries, ruling-class strategists will attempt to come up with responses to reduce the impact of climate change and manage these problems on their terms. Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright plausibly suggest in *Climate Leviathan* that this could involve the US or China leading an effort with other imperialist states to “save the planet” using geoengineering and other measures, backed up by military might. Supporters of such a move would present it as the only possible response to an emergency situation. People on the left would be under a lot of pressure to go along – worse than the pressure to support the “War on Terror” after September 11, 2001. Rulers wouldn’t let a serious crisis go to waste – they’d do their best to take advantage of the situation to boost their power and profits. Strikes and protests could be restricted even more than they are by “security” measures today. Capitalist democracy, already thinned out in the neoliberal era and especially since 2001, could be further limited or suspended.

What does this mean for radicals in the Canadian state? Obviously we should be working with other people to build the climate justice movement and other organizing efforts. But that’s not enough. We should orient towards building a new left, bearing in mind that climate change will likely accelerate social contradictions. Most of what I’ve [written](#) recently about building the radical left on Prairies applies in other regions too.

I’d like to stress two points.

First, as Matthew Brett [argues](#) we should “feel the scandal of our divisions.” “We ought to be ashamed of petty interpersonal or ideological divisions. At a time when the activist left is weak and divided, it’s vital to focus on common goals and principles, rather than obsessing over difference and division,” although “some differences cannot be overlooked.”

The situation we’re in – a stable capitalist society where the ruling class rules unchallenged, with the working class highly fragmented, divided and depoliticized and a feeble radical left – calls for us to unite on the basis of politics that can

guide our activity in the current period. That's different from organizing around a specific political tradition like Trotskyism or anarcho-communism (or as part of a narrower current within a tradition). It's also different from adopting a basis of unity that claims to have answers to questions that we just don't face in this moment of history, such as precisely what kind of society beyond capitalism we're aiming for or exactly how a transition beyond capitalism could be started.

For us to advance struggles and start building a new left in this era we need anti-capitalist, anti-oppression, social-struggle ecological justice politics with a commitment to constructive involvement in broad workplace, community and campus organizing. Uniting on such a basis doesn't mean forgetting about other political questions – it's about putting the emphasis on what matters most now.

Second, talking about the urgent need to build a new left doesn't take us very far. We need to get serious about learning how to build better in the circumstances in which we find ourselves and getting to work in whatever ways we can.

There's been an almost complete break between cohorts in Canada, so that almost none of the lessons learned between the 1960s and the mid-1990s about how to build the radical left have been passed down to today's activists. It's not that everything we need to know merely awaits rediscovery. Far from it! But some methods have been tested and shown to be effective, while others have been shown to be ineffective. Let's learn and use what works. And let's learn from our experiences, like the failure of the [Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly](#) and, for a positive example, the process leading to the launch of [Solidarity Halifax](#).

[There are no short cuts to a new left](#). The best next step will be different in Toronto, where the radical left is larger than in other cities but also more divided, than in other places. Quebec Solidaire, a sizeable left-reformist party, makes the landscape of the left different in Quebec. But we can and must try to take a step towards a new left.