

ECOSOCIALIST MOVEMENT

As Capitalism Nature Socialism, is a journal of Ecosocialism, and as Ecosocialism is necessarily a global movement, so do we need to inform our readers about its development around the world. Thus we are happy to introduce “Ecosocialist Movement,” a column by the distinguished British ecosocialist, Derek Wall, who will be reporting on the emergence and struggles of this new way of organizing society beyond capitalism and in harmony with nature. Derek has been the Principal Male Speaker of the U.K. Green Party and has just completed a run for Parliament in the district of Windsor—alas, without success, perhaps owing to the residence of the Queen within the very bounds of his campaign. His latest book, The Rise of the Green Left: Inside the World Ecosocialist Movement, will soon be published by Pluto. We welcome him to these pages.

—The Editors

Ecosocialism, the Left, and the U.K. Greens

Derek Wall

At one point I mention a common criticism of her party—that it’s like a watermelon: green on the outside, red inside. “I love the idea that that’s meant to be a criticism. On Question Time the other day David Starkey said, “Well, the trouble with you is you’re socialist.” I mean, “Yeah. What’s your problem?”¹

—Aida Edemariam interviewing U.K. Green Party MP Caroline Lucas

The May general election saw the U.K. elect its first Green Party Member of Parliament. Caroline Lucas, the Green Party leader, won with 31 percent of the vote in the Brighton Pavillion constituency. Significantly for ecosocialists, Caroline Lucas has been prepared to challenge capitalism and defend what she sees as the “socialist principles” of the Green Party. The Green Party of England and Wales has a reputation as the most left-leaning Green Party in Europe, and the U.K. has seen ecosocialists organize with increasing effectiveness both inside and outside the Green Party.

The U.K. has a complex political system with an elected first chamber, the House of Commons, and an unelected second chamber, the House of Lords. Constitutional change in the late 1990s led to the creation of a separate parliament for Scotland and less powerful assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland. Increasingly in the U.K., elections have been held using a variety of systems of proportional representation, which has led to the election of Green Party members to various institutions. The House of Commons elections, which determine the government of the U.K., have used a “first past the post” system, which requires a candidate to win more votes than any other in a given geographical area. This has generally made it difficult for smaller parties to gain parliamentary seats.

The Green Party of England and Wales is separate from the Green Party of Scotland, which currently has two members in the Scottish Parliament. The party was

¹ Interview with the first British Green Party Member of Parliament, Caroline Lucas, by Aida Edemariam, “Caroline Lucas: ‘We could have had a new politics. This isn’t it,’” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2010, online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/15/caroline-lucas-green-party-new-politics>.

originally known as “People” and was founded in 1972 by a number of ex-members of the center-right Conservative Party. “People” was initially influenced by the radical right-wing but nonetheless anti-capitalist views of the late Edward Goldsmith,² who edited *The Ecologist* magazine. In 1975, “People” was renamed the Ecology Party. Influenced by the success of the German Greens, it finally became the Green Party in the 1980s and has been moving gently to the left for a number of years. In response to the Labour Party’s movement to the right, particularly under former Prime Minister Tony Blair who led the U.K. into the Iraq war, a number of former Labour Party members have joined the Green Party.

To win a parliamentary constituency, a political party needs to build up a strong concentration of support in a particular area. Brighton, a seaside town in southern England, is well known as a counterculture center and has one of the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations in the country. The Green Party has been building up support over more than a decade, and during the 2005 general election, longtime U.K. Green Party member Keith Taylor gained 21 percent of the vote in the Pavilion constituency. He was replaced by Caroline Lucas, who at the time was a Green Party Member of the European Parliament.³ Lucas had joined the party after being involved in the peace movement during the 1980s and had proved to be a charismatic figure. She was elected as a local councillor in Oxford in 1993. During the 1990s, the Green Party achieved some electoral victories, but many feared that it would lose its critical edge. In an action that some members interpreted as evidence of a move to “realo” politics and deradicalization, in 2007 the party abolished its posts of Principal Speakers and replaced them with a leader and deputy-leader.

The Green Party managed to top the poll in local and European elections in the Brighton Pavilion constituency and ran a carefully targeted campaign in the general election. Disillusionment in the U.K. with the traditional parties after a parliamentary expenses scandal combined with a significant amount of positive media coverage resulted in the election of Caroline Lucas this May, with the Labour Party candidate in second place.

Lucas has pursued a broadly left program stressing both environmental goals and opposition to the cuts in social services promised by the three main U.K. political parties. One of her first acts as a member of parliament was to speak at a public meeting in solidarity with Greece. The lowering of the country’s bond rating in December prompted a debt crisis and a European bailout in exchange for which the Greek government agreed to impose across-the-board public sector wage cuts, reductions in pension payments, and higher taxes on consumer goods.⁴ In her first speech to parliament, Lucas talked about the legacy of Keir Hardie, who in 1892 was the first Labour MP to be elected to the British parliament. Her left orientation contrasts with most European Green Parties, which in recent years have become less radical and less likely to define themselves as on the left. In both Ireland and the Czech Republic, for example, Greens have entered into coalition with right-wing governments.

Caroline’s campaign attracted considerable interest. She was endorsed by Salma

² See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/oct/01/truocolours>.

³ With Caroline Lucas’s election to the British Parliament, Keith Taylor has been appointed to replace her as the South East region’s new Member in the European Parliament. See: <http://www.carolinelucasmep.org.uk/>.

⁴ Patrick Ayers, “Crisis in Europe—Working People in Revolt,” SocialistAlternative.org, June 22, 2010, online at: <http://www.socialistalternative.org/news/article11.php?id=1403>.

Yaqoob, leader of the anti-war Respect Party, and hundreds of activists including many from outside the Green Party travelled to Brighton to help with her campaign. Unlike most Green Party races, which are typically given scant if any mainstream press attention, the mass media gave the campaign considerable coverage.

Green Left, an explicitly ecosocialist network in the Green Party of England and Wales, has been working hard to move the party leftward since it was founded in 2006. Its founding meeting adopted the Headcorn declaration, which outlined the mission of the organization and its commitment to ecosocialism, noting:

Green Left (GL) is based on the assumption that capitalism is a system that wrecks the planet and promotes war. A green society must be based on economic, political, and social justice. GL, in short, works to promote ecosocialism as a solution to our planetary ills. GL supports the democratic structures in the party and encourages transparency, accountability, and engagement in all organs of the party. We also see the Green Party as a “bottom up” political organization where the principles of the membership are paramount and not a “top down” one where a self-designated political elite decides on policies and principles.

GL aims to increase and improve the international links of the Green Party, building links with radical greens and ecosocialists across the planet. It will work closely with members of other European Green Parties to reform the workings of the European Green Party structures that must be democratized. Green politics must realize the slogan “think globally, act locally” by linking practical local campaigns to global issues of ecology, democracy, justice, and liberation.

GL aims to act within the Green Party so as to raise Green Party politics to meet the demands of its radical policies. Green politics needs to be based on dynamic campaigning and hard intellectual groundwork to create workable alternatives.

GL aims to build regional campaigns and contribute to coalition-building through coherent alignments and open discussion with progressive anti-capitalists. The movement that is required to address the issues across Britain, Europe, and the world will not be the sole preserve of one party. The movement requires the development of united action by progressive forces including organizations formed by working people to defend their interests in the workplace. Within this diverse movement GL will stand firmly in favor of the libertarian and democratic traditions of ecosocialism.

Ecosocialist Beginnings

Ecosocialism has long roots in the U.K. William Morris, who is often seen as the first ecosocialist, was one of Britain’s most important Marxist thinkers and organizers in the 1880s. Peter Gould in his book *Early Green Politics* showed how between 1884 and 1905 anarchism, socialism, and radical green politics overlapped to a considerable extent. These ecosocialist traditions waned dramatically as technocratic and productivist approaches came to dominate British left politics. Nonetheless, in the 1930s the Communist Party was involved in mass trespasses to reclaim the rights of working-class people to have access to beautiful areas of nature, such as Kinder Scout, a moorland plateau popular with walkers that is now part of a national park. During the 1940s, the short-lived Commonwealth Party was active in promoting both socialism and ecological concerns.

In 1956 a number of leading Communist Party activists and intellectuals left the

party in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary to crush the Hungarian Uprising. These included the British historian E.P. Thompson. Famous for his masterly *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson's biography of William Morris helped remind activists of the ecosocialist thought of Morris.

The literary theorist and independent socialist Raymond Williams argued in 1982,

we can see that in local, national and international terms, there are already kinds of thinking which can become the elements of an ecologically conscious socialism. We can begin to think of a new kind of social analysis in which ecology and economics become, as they always should be, a single science.⁵

During the 1970s and 80s, a left green group, the Socialist Environment and Resources Association (SERA), was active with members in the Labour Party, the then Ecology Party, and other organizations. It campaigned strongly against nuclear power and promoted ecosocialist ideas and had some influence on the left of the Labour Party, particularly around the project for municipal socialism, which saw figures like Ken Livingstone taking power in local governing authorities such as the Greater London Council. SERA is still active but has closed its membership to non-Labour Party members. It was influenced by the movement of the entire Labour Party to the right under Tony Blair, after Blair was elected Party leader in the 1990s.

In the 1970s, the Ecology Party emerged from the right. During the 1980s under the influence of figures such as Jonathan Porritt, it tended to stress a "neither left nor right" orientation, though its policies advocated social justice and were increasingly left. The growth of the then radical German Greens also influenced its trajectory. A number of ecosocialist organizations have been active in the party. During the 1980s, the Association of Socialist Greens, which included the author and party co-chair Penny Kemp, sought to work with left groups outside of the party. During the 1990s, The Way Ahead represented left opinion in the party along with Green Revolution, which was more oriented toward the non-violent, direct action environmental movement.

During the 1990s, Earth First! was formed as a loose network in Britain but was influenced more by social ecology than deep ecology, as was its U.S. counterpart, and contributed to a much wider non-violent direct action movement. This broad movement was explicitly anti-capitalist. In the form of Reclaim the Streets, it mounted a series of large and militant actions, including the J18 protest in 1999 that saw 7,000 activists disrupt the financial heart of Britain in the City of London. During much of the 1990s, radical and anti-capitalist Greens were drawn to direct action protest.

With the election of the Labour government in 1997 came constitutional change, including the greater use of proportional representation for elections. Besides allowing the Green Party to elect Members of the European Parliament, these changes provided more opportunities for Green candidates in the electoral realm and thus made Green Party electoral activism more attractive. After leaving the Labour Party, Ken Livingstone, who was elected as an independent Mayor in London, worked with the Green Party. In a recent

⁵ R. Williams, *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989).

interview he said “it was because I wanted a Green in the administration.”

You look at Paris and Berlin, they both had green-red coalitions, and I don't think there is a future for the world which doesn't bring these two strands together.”

“We diverted around £50,000 of my campaign fund to the Greens so they could run an advert in *The Guardian* where I urged Labour members to use their second preference to vote Green for the Assembly, and we got three Assembly Members where we thought we might get one.⁶

Tony Blair's decision to support former U.S. President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to thousands of members leaving the Labour Party, some of whom joined the Green Party, continuing to move it to the left.

Ecosocialism Now

There are a number of ecosocialist networks outside the Green Party, including the Red-Green Study group,⁷ which aims to promote ecosocialist self-education. The Alliance for Green Socialism evolved out of an earlier Green Left organization that included many members of the former Communist Party of Great Britain, which had dissolved during the 1990s. The Alliance is strongest in the Yorkshire town of Leeds, where many of its members were in the Labour Party prior to being expelled. It has contested local, parliamentary, and European elections. It stresses that it is an alliance and members have a diversity of views, although it is critical of the Green Party for failing to explicitly challenge capitalism in its manifesto. Alliance candidates contested six parliamentary seats in the 2010 general election and received vote tallies ranging from 1.3 percent to 0.2 percent.⁸

Socialist Resistance,⁹ the British section of the Fourth International, has embraced ecosocialist politics with great energy and commitment. Although Socialist Resistance is based within the anti-war Respect Party, it cooperates where possible with Green Left to promote ecosocialism. For example, as I write, Socialist Resistance and Green Left are organizing a speaking tour for the indigenous and ecosocialist leader Hugo Blanco from Peru.

Socialist Resistance editor and executive committee member, Liam Mac Uaid, discussing an event co-organized by Green Left and Socialist Resistance, noted:

We very deliberately set out to make it internationalist and pluralistic. As you will have seen, it was a genuine collaboration between Socialist Resistance and the Green Left. Both of us brought something of our own approach. Neither side was interested in “poaching” a couple of the other's members. I'm not privy to their inner secrets, but I'm guessing that Green Left is not planning entry work in Respect anytime soon, and we won't be joining the Green Party, either. It has been a genuine example of two currents who agree on the importance of ecosocialism working together. Nothing more and nothing less.

⁶ Martin Hoscik, “GLA at 10 – Ken Livingstone interview part one,” *MayorWatch*, May 31, 2010, online at: <http://www.mayorwatch.co.uk/gla-at-10-ken-livingstone-interview-part-one/201011335>.

⁷ See: <http://www.redgreenstudygroup.org.uk/>. Several members of the U.K. Red-Green Study Group are affiliated with CNS, and the group has served as our U.K editorial group.

⁸ See: <http://www.greensocialist.org.uk/ags/>.

⁹ See: <http://socialistresistance.org/>.

The result has been a better event than either of us could have pulled off left to our own devices. Being in separate organizations is a lot less important than agreeing on many aspects of the politics, and the event today shows that it is possible to organize together around those parts of politics on which we have a shared understanding.

That's significant because if we are to build a mass movement to successfully challenge the climate change that capitalism is creating, those of us on the traditional Marxist left have to admit that we have a great deal to learn from those individuals and organizations which have taken the issue much more seriously than we have for a great deal longer than we have. We need to become as familiar with the science, the debates and what the possible solutions are as some in this room are with what to many people, er, most of the working class, are the arcane debates in the Bolsheviks before 1917. You don't do that without listening to our guests from the Climate Camp, the Campaign Against Climate Change, Harcan Clearskies, and the experiences of those for whom climate change is already a life or death matter in the Global South.¹⁰

Although British politics has been shifting to the right, ecosocialists have been making modest progress and are focused in a variety of ways on turning an ecosocialist vision into a practical political program in the U.K.

¹⁰ Liam Mac Uaid, "Making Our Programme Commonsense for Millions," *Socialist Resistance*, September 13, 2009, online at: <http://socialistresistance.org/?p=658>.