

# What is left of the world at the end of the month?

In the face of rising temperatures and sea level, forest fires, and the extinction of species, it has become almost impossible to turn a blind eye to the ecological crisis. The time to save the planet from mankind, and thus mankind from itself, melts away as fast as the Antarctic ice sheets. Thanks to a year of protests organized by Fridays for Future, the public can no longer treat climate change as a marginal issue. And yet, despite the lip service the government pays to the protesters, even in Germany, the issue of climate change is tackled without really challenging the status quo. The coal-fired power plants in Lusatia and Rhine in Germany will continue to be able to emit CO<sup>2</sup> into the air for another 20 years, and the fossil-fueled automotive industry is still firmly in control. Meanwhile, politicians are trying to appease the protesters, which often ends up undermining their radical demands. But we should not engage at that level, because it has become absolutely necessary—vital,

even—to insist on our most extreme demands and to build up as much pressure as possible from the ground up. At the same time, in the midst of the protests, it is necessary to agree on what we want to fight for, and how.

## Consume differently for a better world?

The climate movement does not lack proposals on what one could do as an individual to help save the planet. Fewer plastic bags, trains instead of cars, less meat and more local products—all of these are useful suggestions because they draw attention to how many resources we consume uselessly every day. These proposals raise the idea that we could stop climate change if only we were to change our individual behavior. But is that true?

First, sustainable consumption is not only a question of the will, but rather, and above all, a matter of the purse. With a net income of 1000 € many

families hardly contemplate whether to buy cheese from an organic food store or a big-box store; rather they must worry about whether the money will last until the end of the month. Political reforms that aim to regulate individual consumption face similar problems. For example, if the French President Emmanuel Macron introduces a petrol tax in order to reduce CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, it is those taxpayers with the least money who are most likely to give up consumption: those rural workers who depend on their cars to get to work. Wealthy people who, statistically, drive the most, are largely unaffected by this reform, because their wealth buffers its effects. It is quite unlikely that their consumption patterns will change. The yellow vests movement in France, by vehemently opposing the tax through demonstrations, blockades, and gatherings, has exposed the CO<sup>2</sup> tax as a shameless attempt to use the ecological crisis to further plunder the workers and the poor.

Secondly, trying to prevent climate change through changing individual consumption is in stark contradiction to the way our society produces. The appeal to consume less, and more sensibly, is inconsistent with profit-driven capitalist production. In our capitalist society, what and how much is produced is determined not by what we reasonably need, but by whether

it generates profits for the producing firms. For example, the production of solar panels did not collapse because we did not want electricity from solar energy, but because companies could not make a profit from it. In addition, under the doctrine of private ownership of means of production and profit, the volume of production must be continually increased. In order to prevail in capitalist competition, firms must constantly reinvest their capital to expand production and to expand their share of the market—all at the expense of the environment. The means to build a far-reaching public transport system, to create a system of organic food production that could feed the world's population three times, and to develop sustainable energy sources have long existed. Ecological crisis is a direct consequence of capitalist production. As production is geared to profit and not to our needs or the planet's natural limits, ultimately making environmentally conscious consumer choices will not sufficiently influence production.

It is not the workers who decide what and how they produce, but the firm owners. They can manage things as they please—at the expense of the environment and of people who have to endure long working hours, low wages, health-damaging working conditions, and fear for their future.

The fact that we readily hook ourselves up to the drip of this profit machine, and therefore serve the interests of capitalist firm owners, complicates matters even further. That is, unless we own anything other than our labor power—at best with a university degree, at worst without qualifications and residence permits—we are forced to sell this labor power by going to work. For us to sell our labor power, there must also be someone who buys it. In turn, this requires a flourishing economy. So, absurdly, as wage-earners we must be interested in the firms' ability to make profit, so that there are enough jobs—and this always amounts to over-exploitation of nature. After all, coal miners do not strike against the closure of coal mines because they enjoy the CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, but because their very existence depends on their job at the mine, and they know the consequences of unemployment in this society.

## How and with whom to fight?

All this means that we live under circumstances that do not allow us to challenge and change this mode of production—at least not as individuals, not alone. At present, we do not collectively decide what—and above all, how—we produce. Production is controlled by the owners of capital,

and is therefore dictated by the drive for profit. On top of that, our own dependency on capital (in the form of wages) means that our ability to have a good life depends on the healthy functioning of the polluting production processes. So what can we do?

Some argue that government action can make capitalism greener and better for the society. The promise is that the state can initiate a radical ecological and social transformation through reforms and technological innovation, resulting in a transition towards both cleaner energy and a more just society. But state reforms are bound to run into the need to not hurt capital, that is, to ensure that capitalist firms do not suffer losses. This is because the state wants to remain attractive to firms, which bring in income for the governments, as well as jobs for the citizens. Therefore, from the political point of view, reforms are particularly suited to shifting the costs onto the workers—as with the CO<sup>2</sup> tax in France. Far-reaching interventions, which are desperately needed in the face of climate change—be it energy transition, organic agriculture, or sustainable transport system—will always be too costly from the perspective of capitalist firms, and therefore also of the state.

The good news is that we do not need to care about the capitalist firms' profits if we do not care about the contin-

uation of capitalist society. However, we should not assume that politics is on our side. Rather, it is necessary to expand the pressure and the power from below and to choose corresponding forms of action. Large nationwide demonstrations with continued participation are indeed impressive and valuable as symbols of people's resistance, but they do not force the state and firms to act. Occupations like those in the Hambach Forest and the anti-coal movement in Germany, or even blockades, as recently tried at London Airport, are promising because they bring the local profit machinery to a halt, however briefly.

What we also lack is the extension of the climate protests to the realm of production. The climate strike will only reach its full potential if it is not just high school and university students that take to the streets. The movement has to spread to other areas. An actual strike, for example in the energy sector, would be an extremely powerful demonstration of people's will, as it can paralyze the whole power supply chain within a very short time. All in all, strikes across different sectors will increase pressure on capitalist firms, because withholding labor does financial damage like no other form of protest. Strikes also make it impossible for firms and the state to keep up the appearance of normality, and so the status quo. This

is the only language that the state and businesses understand.

Last but not least, the workers of today, whom we will become tomorrow, also have the power to overcome the conditions of production. To do this, we must overcome the power of firms and governments to make decisions regarding production, and instead place those decisions under the collective control of a truly democratic community. Only then we will be able to take action that is not in the interest of the owners of capital, but in the interest of our needs and those of the planet. Even if it sounds utopian at present, it is the only realistic way.

Those who follow this path will soon see the fierce opposition of those who have a stake in maintaining the status quo. Heads of government and corporate boards make concessions to some of the climate movement's demands, but they have nothing to contribute to the actual resolution of the crisis. From these actors and their supporters will soon come the call to be sensible and to strive for realistic solutions. But we know: it would only be reasonable to put a quick end to this blind, cataclysmic social order.

(Future) Workers for Future

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