

# We can't change the world without the workers

BY ROBIN SIVAPALAN

**A**ROUND two thousand activists mobilised for the 2007 Camp for Climate Action. It was held in a field near Heathrow airport in west London for a week in August. It was to highlight the pollution caused by air traffic.

The camp defied a high court injunction won by the airport's owners BAA. With its dozen related actions, the heavy handed policing and 71 arrests, it made global headline news.

It has been widely seen as the birth of a new movement to stop climate change. In its own terms, by getting itself noticed, it was an almost perfect success.

As a socialist activist participating at the camp I feel there is a lot to assess.

The idea for "climate camps" was initially discussed at an eco-camp set-up at Stirling during the 2005 G8 protests. Drax power station in north Yorkshire, the biggest carbon polluter in the UK, was the first target last year.

The camp model is about agitating and educating on climate change as well as promoting solutions by demonstrating "sustainable living". It is also about taking direct action against the corporate interests who are the main cause of climate change. All of this is geared towards building "the movement".

The organisers impose a model of non-hierarchical, consensus-based decision making with a focus on direct action. Despite the single model of organisation there are, officially, no leaders.

This year's camp was extremely impressive for a number of reasons. The vast majority of activists understood that the actions themselves were not the solution but were designed to both raise awareness and demonstrate the "ordinary" person's power to take power into their own hands to change and save the world.

The camp brought attention to the local community campaign against the addition of a third runway to what's already the largest international airport in the world. 1,200 homes, a primary school and potentially three villages are to be demolished.

The 2M lobby, an apparently powerful grouping of 12 local authorities lined up to oppose the third runway — covering 23 parliamentary constituencies, representing two million people who will be affected by the noise and pollution — can also thank the camp for getting it more coverage. Even the London Assembly's vote against a 6th terminal (and the 5th hasn't even opened!) and the third runway was little noticed until the climate camp came onto the scene.

Other camp actions drew attention to other "climate criminals" such as Shell and BP. Activists dressed as red herrings descended on scam "greenwash" carbon offsetting companies. Others protested at Carmel Agrexco (importing food from the Occupied Territories in Israel-Palestine), Farnborough and Biggin Hill private-jet airports, the Department for Transport and even Clive Soley's garden (former Labour MP now heading the expansion lobby). The week culminated in a blockade of BAA's offices with the workers sent home for 24 hours.

**T**HE Climate Camp went down well locally, giving new confidence and resolve to beleaguered and bullied residents. Positive links were made in the run-up to the camp; there was co-operation and co-planning of actions throughout. This was a joy to see and hear about. Local socialist MP John McDonnell camped out one night.

Local workers — even (secretly) at least one BA worker — pitched their tents during the week of aptly freakish weather. Delegations from the camp visited the picket line of striking workers at the Japanese owned freight company, Nippon Express who, in turn, seemed generally supportive of the activists, if a little bemused. The local council also formally endorsed the camp.

The camp had its own strong sense of community, was organised around geographical neighbourhoods (or barrios if you like) to strengthen local networks of activists. Each



*Climate camp protestors during the march*

neighbourhood was a basic democratic unit. They would have a morning meeting over breakfast where issues arising from the camp would be discussed and "actions" were thrashed out and debated. Decisions made within the neighbourhood would be represented by "spokes" to cross-camp spokes-councils and vice versa. Spokes and facilitators were chosen anew each day.

Consensus methods often worked well, but on a larger scale were tedious, dwindling the numbers involved seriously and working against democracy.

As a means of initially involving people and boosting people's confidence, it is a great process. It's a bit like "get-to-know-you" games used in team building — essential to build trust among activists who need to rely on each other especially if facing police violence. But to make a fetish of it and abjure at all times simple votes is not good. Either the consensus is an illusion and people operate under peer pressure, or chaos ensues. Some people would do one thing and other people different autonomous things... I did despair at times.

Each neighbourhood ran a vegan kitchen with volunteers from the neighbourhood and had an eating and social area under its own marquee beside which people camped. Each neighbourhood provided volunteers to see to the central compostable toilets, to do watch duties and other tasks that came up.

There was a central kitchen and store, a legal support tent, media tent, welcome tent, well-being tent, a bike borrowing deposit, and a general camp office. The huge main marquee hosted whole camp meetings and could be divided up for the workshops that filled the day. As a logistical operation it was impressive.

Workshops allowed people insight into how it was all put together; there was an emphasis on skill-sharing and education to equip people to take on organisational roles in the future.

**N**ATURALLY enough activists had greatly differing degrees of political coherence. There were anarchists of varying descriptions and groupings, generic bland peace and environmental activists, life-long hippies, NGO types as well as Marxist socialists (in small number).

Predominant was the "localist outlook" — people who believe in seeking local solutions to energy and food production. In my view that is indicative of a complete failure — or wanton refusal — to get to grips with the reality of global capitalism, capitalist governments and state machinery.

The fact that 75% of energy is lost before it reaches its destination does point to a radical reduction in reliance on trans-global food transportation and oil-intensive agriculture.

But it is deluded and futile to believe that capitalism can be displaced by more individual people choosing to be more ethical in their consumer and lifestyle choices. But the focus on local solutions appears more coherent these days.

Two main localist solutions presented them-

selves at the camp workshops — "transition towns" and "permaculture" — both of which have many desirable potentials for socialists in their ideology and methods. Neither are decisive measures but surely represent advances.

Another challenger for hearts and minds was the Tradeable Energy Quotas (TEQs) proselytisers. They addressed the fundamental scam of the EU Emission Trading Scheme by basing a master-plan on a new carbon standard which would replace the gold standard in the economy. This displays a glaring ignorance of how capitalism works, and is a conscious accommodation to capitalism.

Alongside this were the more sophisticated advocates of large scale techno fixes. These activists include George Monbiot, and seemed to be the real organising force of the climate camp. The techno fixers also wanted drastic carbon rationing with a view to reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 90%.

I share their belief that we face a tipping point in the climate change process in as little as seven years... They largely (and rightly) reject the new capitalist schemes of carbon trading, carbon offsetting and green consumerism as money making scams and cynical "greenwash" to appease the well-off.

Monbiot kindly warned the anarchists in the tent that they might not like it but tough situations require tough realities: the state will have to be convinced and used, no less, in order to avert climate change. How else will you get coach lanes on motorways and a European super-grid which then connects to Iceland, to Scandinavia and to North Africa as recommended by the German government. How indeed, George?

**T**HROUGHOUT the entire camp I heard only one mention of the trade unions — by Monbiot, and in reference to some RMT-established statistic. While there was a pre-established consensus that "the public" must not be disrupted by the camp — not a single flight disrupted today for homemade organic jam tomorrow — there was no attempt to tackle the serious question of the jobs and livelihoods dependent on dirty emission-producing industries. Indeed, one socialist reporter has said that the camp organisers refused to meet with the pilots' union.

The TUC has initiated a lobby group with businesses to urge the government to opt for expansion on the basis of the creation of thousands of new jobs.

But there are two reasons to win workers' support. One is a democratic imperative — to collaborate in the formulation of job conversion ideas and demands to make on the government and BAA. The other is about creating a bigger, broader campaign. Without the workers on side, our aims will not prevail.

Both socialists and environmentalists need to put forward positive immediate demands for the environment that show to workers that it is possible to make environmentally-sound choices. For example, fighting for the re-nationalisation of the rail and public transport under workers' control is almost certainly a prerequi-

site for fares coming down within ground-level transport, and ultimately becoming free. The recent Metronet strikes for public ownership should be actively supported by anyone seriously concerned with practical solutions rather than moralising about cheap domestic flights and the glory of cycling.

But better political solutions go hand in hand with better political democracy. The fact that socialist organisations along with the big NGOs were banned from having an organisational presence at the camp is not a good sign.

**A**NEW layer of young activists are being educated about the realities of environmental destruction and climate change. Socialists should pay attention to and try to get to grips with some of the technological and political solutions being debated. We should not allow real solutions to become ghettoised.

These eco-activists' sympathies are with common ownership, a struggle against alienation, social justice. It's not a bad starting point, and the low level of class struggle means there are few other alternatives.

The activists continue a long history of white middle class radical utopianism. With little direct experience, as a whole, of working-class realities, nor acknowledgement of the vast accumulated understanding of and struggle against capitalism among workers, they opt for superficial "single issue" struggles, necessarily alternating between moralising about the symptoms of a system and direct action which is never intended to have a mass social base.

On the other hand the international-working class socialist movement has a lot to learn about the pressing issues of bio diversity, ice-sheet melting and the albedo effect, peak-oil, carbon basins etc. Climate change is in the short-term the most pressing global issue for the working-class and oppressed peoples of the world who already suffer the worst extremes of its effects under capitalism.

Many of the debates I hear in the socialist movement focus on the worst politics of the green movement. No, we do not support measures that merely price out working-class people from newly accessible luxuries while allowing the rich to continue enjoying them apace. Neither do we settle for environmental strategies that leave capitalist social relations and exploitation largely untouched.

Many of us, myself included, dispute the belief among certain socialists that capitalism can adapt through techno-fixes and anti-pollution strategies. This is an extrapolation from the experience of environmental reform in capitalist metropolises and have no bearing on the scale and trajectory of destruction of the rest of the world.

If we are to be something other than brazen hypocrites and betrayers of the international working class — and indeed humanity — we have to fuse changed realities into immediate perspectives for international working-class revolution. We also urgently need to shed from our thinking the idea that that socialism is an inverted form of economic growth under capitalism. I'm sure it isn't.

Anyone who concerns themselves with Marx's prime concern about human alienation from the natural world — an intrinsic part of exploitation — and positively strives for meaningful human freedom will begin to have some serious affinity with many of the embryonic solutions to be found among the environmental movement.

It seems to me that our current paralysis and inertia partly represents a failure to think through the lessons of Stalinism and thoroughly sloughing off the anti-Marxism that went with it. The working-class can develop its own forms of organising production that can and must overcome human alienation from nature and can avert climate change.

Genuine international working-class revolution against capitalism, the self-activity of the working class, freeing up our creative — as opposed to destructive and consumptive capacities — can change and save the world.