

The E.I.N.: Chapter Two: What Is To Be Done?

By Joel Kovel

When the Ecosocialist International Network was founded on the Seventh of October, 2007 in the Parisian suburb of Montreuil, it was with a sigh of relief, a thrill of anticipation, and the recognition that there was a great big hole where the future is to be located: relief that so momentous a possibility had been set going; anticipation of being part of that history-in-the-making; and scarcely a clue as to what we had brought into being was in fact going to be.

Three principles define the EIN and unite its members — recognition of the ecocidal character of capital accumulation; the necessity for a socialist alternative as a model for surpassing capital; and the requirement that this new, or “eco” socialism must do more than deal with the toxic effects of accumulation, but needs also solve the great problem of social production: how to live within limits set down by ecological necessity.

These points are comfortably abstract; being so, they give ecosocialists a common name and some space within which to congregate and to get to know each other. However, we are not affected abstractly by the ecological crisis, but according to where life intersects with world-historical forces and brings forth concrete differences within the broad zones of agreement. Class distinctions, gender distinctions, distinctions along the great axes of empire, distinctions according to historical phase, or to generations — these are the raw material that must fruitfully interact if ecosocialism is to develop as the alternative to capital's regime. Thus difference is to be respected as contestation and a place of nonviolent struggle. Differences between ecosocialists represent where ecosocialism should go to work.

Because Montreuil chiefly manifested a Northern European outlook, it was wisely decided that the 2009 plenary meeting should be held in the Global South. There is no place better to realize this than steamy Belém at the mouth of the Amazon, the old colonial town located one degree South of the Equator. And so it was good news that the World Social Forum had decided to hold their ninth global gathering there — and it was to be even better news that this was to be in the bellwether country of Brazil, for as we learned in the EIN meeting which piggy-backed on the WSF, the notion of ecosocialism actually arose in Brazil, in 1991, a full decade before Michael Löwy and I put together the first Ecosocialist Manifesto.

Brazil has the twofold distinction of containing the earth's largest reserves of ecosystem resources and its most violent urban zones of industrialization; it is a land rife with “combined and uneven development,” ranging from sophisticated social-democratic zones in the South to frankly feudal areas within the great Northern forests where barons who are a law unto themselves exist alongside the planet's most variegated communities of First Peoples, a country that has

given us eco-cities like Curitiba and martyrs like Chico Méndes — in short, the logical place for the notion of ecosocialism to arise.

It was refreshing to have a bloc of Brazilians among the 110 delegates at the EIN meeting, and also a sizable contingent of Peruvians, including the redoubtable Hugo Blanco, who brought the indigenous perspective into the foreground of the meeting. But no matter who was there the same challenge loomed. For whereas 2007 left one blinking at the amazement of getting started, those who attended the meeting of 2009 had to confront the matter of getting going.

The chief pathway of this was to be the development of the Ecosocialist Manifesto. The Manifesto of 2001 had essentially been a message in a bottle tossed into the ocean by two intellectuals who wanted to give the idea of ecosocialism some international currency. And indeed, a goodly number of people who showed up in Montreuil did so on this account. But as the sole organized product of the ecosocialist movement, so would the manifesto have to be the first object, so to speak, of ecosocialist labor. In other words it would have to be rewritten, in part because of deficiencies in the first draft (which being composed late in 2001, had among other problems, too much of the shadow of 9/11 hanging over it), and mainly because redoing it would be a way of getting the organization going.

A committee was contentiously chosen for this purpose, whose work was to be modified by a mechanism allowing for continual review by the membership, the process being conducted through the internet. We are grateful for this, and indeed, there would be no EIN without the internet. However, the difficulties of this means for composing the second manifesto, or as it came to be called, Declaration, can scarcely be overstated.

In any event, the Declaration was eventually completed, printed out, and presented to the meeting in Belém. Nobody was under the illusion that it went beyond the minimal adequacy of being the next rung on our ladder. (A copy of the English version is appended to this report; there are also translations into Portuguese, Italian, Greek and Turkish.) Its functionality is simple enough: the Belém Declaration presents the elementary principles of ecosocialism, principles that need to be worked on by an organization comprised of those who would subscribe to them. Thus, in order to join the EIN one has only, so to speak, let the Declaration into her or his heart, and affirm it while keeping in mind that it falls far short of where we have to go — and also affirm that we can begin to move to where we have to go by working collectively to develop and expand the Declaration through praxes that creatively engage the real differences that shape the innumerable activists who are drawn into ecosocialism. Neither dogma nor blueprint, the Declaration is essentially a parchment on which ecosocialism can become inscribed.

Climbing the ladder

We were able to gather some 500 signatures to the Declaration in the weeks leading up to the meeting in Belém on February 2, 2009. About 120 of these were from Brazil, with sizable collections from Britain, Canada, Greece, Turkey

and the United States. Alas, only one person signed on from Argentina, Germany, and Indonesia, and none from China, Egypt, Iran, Japan, Korea, Russia, Sweden, and a hundred other nations. It is obvious that the most pressing task for the EIN is to expand this list all across the globe. We look toward the day when spell-checks on computers no longer place wavy red lines of non-recognition under the word, *ecosocialism*.

The number of those who are ready to sign onto the EIN is very considerable; and the chief limiting factor is our capacity to organize them. Untold millions are becoming increasingly fed-up with capitalism and ready to think of radical alternatives. The EIN is from one angle, simply that which allows them to become "told." Practically speaking, therefore, the size of the signatory list has nothing immediately to do with the aptness of people for the message of ecosocialism and everything to do with the organizing of those who canvass them. We readily admit that an instant poll of the world's population would not at present come up with majority support for the cardinal principles of ecosocialism. But so what, so long as the number of those who do is a whole lot larger than 500. How large is this number? No-one knows for certain, but it could very well be in the millions: say 66 million, which is but one percent of world population, a very sizable, and certainly a reasonable, figure. What would a petition with 66 million signatures look like? 6.6 million,? 660, 000, 66,000?

Getting large numbers of people to sign on to the Declaration was the chief decision taken at Belém. This signifies far more than the passive registration connoted by the ordinary petition. It is just what it says: a declaring, an affirmation both by those who present the petition and those who sign it, a commitment to follow through on its precepts, a medium for propagating change, a signal to the world at large that major changes are afoot, and a warning to the powers that be. The gathering defined an intermediate goal for the EIN. The steps that need to be taken toward this are, one might say, the immediately visible rungs on the EIN's ladder. The meeting in Belém began the discussion of what these should be, and we should carry it forward.

- Yes, people should sign on to the Declaration. But this Declaration, the Declaration of Belém? Scarcely — not so much for its content, which is arguable, but because of its unwieldy form, excessive both in size and rhetoric. Somebody needs to redo it for the purpose at hand, which is to say, streamline it into a single side of a page, and use it to convey in as clear and straightforward a way as possible, a message intelligible to every sentient person on the planet earth, of what are the elementary principles of ecosocialism.
- But this demands translation into the languages of the earth, not just the mainstream languages but the languages of Africa, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the indigenous wherever they may be. And this of course requires translators, distribution networks, and ways of compiling the signatures and registering the signatories.

- This in turn requires a de-centralized structure for the EIN. How should this be achieved? Should it be by language group, regionalized bloc, nation-state? In any case, we are led to a notion that the network is not like a spider's web but that it needs to contain nodal points, with each node devolving in both general and particular directions. Last January, for example, a conference held in Oakland, California, set forth the idea of EIN-United States — or was it to be the Western United States, or California, or Northern California? Meanwhile another grouping shows signs of emerging in the Northeast of the United States. Similar formations have appeared in the UK, Brazil, and Turkey, and doubtless elsewhere as well.
- Logically and practically, this implies a kind of “central nervous system” for the EIN as a whole. There is no particular reason why this should be in a fixed place, but it does require a coherent identity and a means of reproduction. Here arises the dilemma of centralization of power. However, the only alternative to having such a dilemma is to not have an EIN at all. If the EIN is going to do work then it needs to have interdependent parts, and also some central function to which these relate. Further, there will be a need for funds and the gathering and distribution of same, inasmuch as we are not quite ready to usher the money-form off the stage of history. We should not be dependent upon existing governments or (in the great majority of cases) foundations for this. It would seem necessary, then, for the regional or national nodes to raise funds from their members and pass a certain quotient on to the international center. In any case, there needs to be a process of drafting constitutional by-laws for the EIN as a whole as well as for its constituted units. And there needs to be a kind of Constitutional Congress for this, and a way of choosing its members. It won't be easy. But the EIN is for life and of life. Life is self-replicating, evolving form; formlessness is heat death — of an individual, of the universe, and also of the products of human labor, including international ecosocialist organizations. The EIN must have a structure; it cannot simply be an internet group, and anyone who cares about an ecosocialist future for society needs to join in the process of building this structure.
- This model has been derived so far from an elementary function of the EIN, the propagation of its membership base. But numerous other functions will normally arise as well. The Declaration, we have emphasized, is arguable. This means that ways of arguing about it need to be provided--ways that extend to the many differences that necessarily arise between those who espouse the core principles of ecosocialism. Yes, we are against capitalism--but what, really, is capitalism?; and what, really, is, or should be, socialism?; and how is production to be ordered so that humankind can express itself freely within ecosystemic principles? Anyone who is sure that he or she knows the answers to these questions is simply a fool. There are good grounds to believe that ecosocialism can

do better than capitalism has done ... but only if we provide the means for ecosocialists to explore the questions. And this, too, must be a prime function of the EIN: to provide a forum for all who sign on to the Declaration to argue and develop its points, and to bring in new perspectives. In the first, fledgling phase of the network, debates about such matters have spontaneously arisen on the internet: a perfectly sensible idea that has gone nowhere because there have been no means of going somewhere. Thus notion after notion is brought forth, provoking a spark here and a quarrel there, only to disappear into the emptiness of cyberspace. Clearly, we must do better. Everyone who espouses the common values must be provided the common means of interacting with others, undoubtedly using the internet as the most democratic modality we now have of communicating. But this cannot remain at that level. It must, rather, be solidified with more formal supports, through the web, no doubt, but in a more highly organized way. If there is to be funding for the administrative function of the EIN, this needs to be extended broadly to the educational and communicative sphere. We need a standing committee on the subject, one extending to the publication of journals and books — and even, down the road, to the provision of schools and training centers. I should think it highly important that this journal be drawn into the process at some level.

- Thus, though it is certainly not appropriate to think of the EIN at its present stage of development as anything like a political party or — heaven forbid! — something along the lines of a “Fifth International,” I for one would not want the imagination stifled to the point of forbidding even the thought of such an outcome down the road. We are not ready now for such a highly developed role. But if and as we develop properly, there is no ruling it out as the EIN matures. And in the meanwhile there should be nothing restraining the emergence of ecosocialist activism from within the network-in-formation.

I am certain that each of the 500 — or the 66,000, or the 66,000,000 — members of the EIN would delight in the news from our most active Turkish delegation, 69 signatories of the Declaration strong, which sets a splendid example. Here is an extract from an email communication of 22 March, 2009, from Elif Bokhurt, of Istanbul, to Michael Löwy and myself:

here, in Turkey; fifth world water forum was done; and we were in Istanbul to protest. Platform against the commercialization of water staged a demonstration; alternative workshops were held; 17 activists are arrested...Last week we were concentrated with these activities. . .

He goes on to ask for collaboration between the Turkish, French and English-language journals — and he will, I am sure, get it.

Some would no doubt counsel against such seemingly extravagant derivatives as have appeared in this little exercise in an imagined climb up a ladder of development for the EIN. And no doubt, what has been depicted here appears a

long way off. We should keep in mind, however, that it defines a line of sight, and a path every step along which will be good in itself as well as the condition for the next step forward. The steps outlined in the Declaration correspond to the real practices of women and men who struggle against global capital. It is time for this struggle itself to take on a global aspect under the name of the Ecosocialist International Network.