

LABOUR, NATURE, CAPITALISM AND COVID-19

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COVID-19 has brought the question of work into sharp focus, at least for a time. In doing so, the problem of climate change seems to have been relegated to the sidelines of political debate. In Australia, the horror of the Summer bushfires, while not forgotten, must be pushed aside to deal with the public health crisis at hand, another all-encompassing rupture in our lives. Like the climate crisis, the implications of COVID-19 stretch far into our future, and the impacts are highly uneven. There are estimates of unemployment reaching double digits by June 2020, the same month our protracted and devastating bushfire season began last year (Westpac, 2020).

In this article, we sketch out the ecological politics of the COVID-19 crisis. Moving from a brief analysis of the present conjuncture, we examine the implications of the crisis for our understanding of socially necessary labour in a post-COVID, climate-changing world. Against nationalist and productivist visions of economic recovery, we argue for a post-COVID-19 politics based on the ecosocialist legacy of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation. Our key contention is that, as we transform the rest of nature through our labour, work and the environment cannot be considered separately. In capitalism, we do this under historical conditions not of our own choosing. A new labour ecology, grounded in an ecosocialist politics, requires collective and democratic control over this production of nature. In order to explore the potential of an ecosocialist future, this paper addresses a question central to the project: what is the purpose of our labour?

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A brief analysis of the present conjuncture

Sweeping changes to the way we live and work wrought by COVID-19 in Australia have magnified the impacts of existing political economic crises and revealed others. What dangers, opportunities and strategic possibilities does this time of stark unveiling present for ecosocialist politics? The dangers are clear. Moves to ‘re-open’ the economy and reinstate regimes of accumulation, perhaps with the addition of government payments to help jump-start flailing demand and secure the liquidity of financial markets, seem inevitable. However, opportunities may lie in the space between this return to business-as-usual and the most obvious cracks in social provisioning revealed by COVID-19. From empty supermarket shelves to eviction notices, the strategic possibilities for an ecosocialist politics now lie in tying the failures of capitalist provision to demands that take us beyond redistribution.

Labour confronts twin crises of socio-ecological reproduction: wage stagnation and the steady decimation of organised labour as overall demand for labour declines; and increasing costs from rentier capitalism, with investment properties and rent being a primary example in the COVID-19 crisis (Benanav 2019). A focus on the contestation of distribution in capitalism, as characterised by class struggle within the neoliberal period, risks ignoring the need to more directly challenge capital on the terrain of production and property relations. COVID-19 has shown that worker-household incomes – the traditional site of redistributive struggle – are increasingly used as income streams to support asset accumulation by the propertied class. This indicates the need to refocus our analyses and demands accordingly.

Moving beyond criticisms of the capitalist labour market that seek only to roll back the worst excesses of neoliberalism, we should instead use this moment to completely reimagine the purpose of our collective labour (Long 2020). This begins with an analysis of the ways in which COVID-19 has exposed the maldistribution of labour in our societies. The response to COVID-19 has been defined by the division of our labour into categories marked ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’. There is some truth to the designation of ‘essential’ workers right now; food provision, health care and logistics are just some examples, but we cannot take at face value what is deemed ‘essential’ within a global pandemic under capitalist social relations of production. The point is not to valorise ‘essential’ work, it is

to contest the determination of what is essential labour, by recognising that what we consider to be ‘essential’ is always historically contingent.

At present the purpose of all of this labour, essential or otherwise, is to create surplus value, and resulting profit for the capitalist class. Any account of a post-COVID-19 economic recovery must deal with the centrality of the surplus extraction for the capitalist class, and the ways they are compelled to restructure the economy in light of the crisis. This private investment, which seeks as its ultimate aim not the satisfaction of needs or social good, but profit, directs what kind of labour we engage in, the conditions we do it under, and the resulting products.

Ecosocialism and the Builders Labourers Federation

The ecosocialist critique of capitalism links the exploitation of labour and degradation of nature, revealing that they are two sides of the same coin (O’Connor 1998). First, human beings are themselves one part of nature, and therefore our struggles to improve our lives and the conditions of our labour are already ecological in one sense. Second, the labour process involves a transformation of nature, which in capitalism is determined by the imperative to create profit (Smith 1984). This is why Diane Elson (2015) argues that the question of how labour is *determined* in any given society is fundamental for our understanding of value relations. Building on this, Huber (2017) contends that a ‘value theory of nature’ allows us to see how the particular determination of labour in capitalism results in the degradation of the rest of nature.

At a time when individual responsibility for ‘solving’ the climate crisis is being internalised by those with the material security to think about such things, COVID-19 has shown this kind of environmentalism to be a farce: it turns out that, rather than the problem being one of uniform overconsumption, many people do not have access to the basic requirements for a secure life. Instead we can look to an ‘ecological politics for the working class’ based on mass participation in the contestation of the degradation of the conditions of life under capitalism (Huber 2019). Precisely because our labour is determined by production for exchange and private profit, it is often alienating and ecologically destructive. How we build a truly just, ecological society begins with the struggle for democratic control over our labour, so that we can collectively decide the conditions under which we produce and reproduce the world.

In the early 1970s in Sydney, members of the NSW Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), led by the late Jack Munday, concerned themselves with these questions (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998). Their 'Green Bans' remain a world-historic example of the social responsibility of labour, achieved by connecting industrial issues to the experience of everyday life in the city. Construction bans were placed on sites by the builders labourers union, and members refused to work on projects that were deemed socially or ecologically harmful by the community. By demanding a say over the purpose of their labour, the BLF called into question a core part of capitalism itself, rejecting the premise that all investment should be directed by the profit motive. Instead they wanted to build things according to communities' needs (Munday 1981). Their understanding of labour conditions included the specific alienation that results from performing work that is destructive, rather than socially useful.

Policy makers will draw on historical inspiration to contextualise and justify their visions for a post-COVID-19 recovery. Already there are calls for a Keynesian-style recovery, with a commitment to full employment and government measures aimed at stabilising the economy, harking back to post-war reconstruction (Dawson 2020). Similar proposals for the expansion of 'green steel' are aimed at restoring economic growth, creating jobs and increasing Australia's export revenue (Wood *et al.* 2020). We caution against plans for recovery that rely on nationalism and productivism to rebuild our society, but our primary concern with these plans is the lack of attention paid to the historical specificity and politics of economic and social change. There is a tendency in these accounts, overwhelmingly from policy makers, to favour top down, technocratic changes to the economy with the aim of eliminating sub-optimal outcomes like inequality. In attempting to flip a few switches and run the simulation again, there is a failure to grapple with the internal crisis tendencies of capitalism. By contrast, the example of the Green Bans not only provides an ecosocialist ethic to draw upon but, crucially, a blueprint for social transformation beginning with workplace democracy and community struggles over reproduction that seek to transform our social relations.

It was the concrete actions of the BLF and allied community members that put a stop to the overdevelopment of places like Centennial Park in Sydney. The social purpose of labour defies a narrow economism and gestures toward an expansive vision of human-nature relations that inevitably takes us beyond the workplace to the city, and ultimately to the planet as a whole. In the words of Munday, 'what is the use of higher wages

alone, if we have to live in cities devoid of parks, denuded of trees, in an atmosphere poisoned by pollution and vibrating with the noise of hundreds of thousands of units of private transport?’ (1981: 143). To invoke the spirit of the BLF today calls for a commitment to internationalism, climate justice and militant struggle against the state and capital to democratise our economy. This will not be easy, and we should be aware of the historical circumstances that made the Green Bans possible, as well as what led to their demise (see Burgmann and Burgmann 1998; Ross 2004).

A new labour ecology

We would like to begin charting a course between workerist and anti-work or post-work debates in light of the sheer amount of labour involved in responding both to climate change and now COVID-19. Instead of work that is meaningless and destructive, the future of labour in a warming world can attend to the care and regeneration of people and the planet, repairing our frayed social fabric and the scarred ecologies we are embedded in. Before we can determine what is ‘essential’ or socially necessary for purposes other than capitalist competition and accumulation, we need social control over our collective labour rather than a new distribution of labour within an existing, predetermined structure (Elson 2015). Competing proposals for a Job Guarantee on the one hand, and a Universal Basic Income on the other, tend to sidestep the question of ownership and control of the means of re/production (Weeks 2011). Both proposals have merits and problems, but the first risks valorising the work ethic and reifying the wage-relation, while the second risks entrenching the primacy of the market. An additional problem with these debates is the privileging of the technocratic policy realm above the material politics of social transformations. Instead we see merit in a ‘new labour ecology’ that is based on decommodification and democratisation (Bhattacharya 2019).

A new labour ecology is not only about the conditions determining labour but how we direct our collective labour to provide what is necessary for a good life. COVID-19 has reemphasised the fatal weaknesses in delivering access to food, shelter and other basic goods and services via the invisible hand of the market. In volume three of *Capital*, Marx distinguished between the ‘realm of necessity’ and the ‘realm of freedom’ to argue that only by satisfying our basic needs through democratic and collective production, could we have access to more time for ‘what we will’, and

therefore true human flourishing (Marx 1991). How do we replace the cold logic of the market with collective provisioning, the commoning of spaces and activities for core social reproduction, and coordinated planning of production, as determined by what is socially necessary?

We have argued elsewhere that the emergent politics of the Green New Deal (GND) offers a chance to articulate and build a world capable of weathering the coming storms (Heenan and Sturman 2020). The GND is predicated on a redirection of labour for a just transition but is open to contestation from competing agendas about what this transition looks like. Because the GND rejects the jobs versus environment trade-off we have been mired in for almost half a century, at its most radical it offers the potential for the ecosocialist vision of the purpose of labour that we have outlined in this paper. The GND also usefully shifts the focus of climate politics away from individual consumption and toward democratic and collective responses to climate change. Finally, it offers an alternative to the environmental movement's ambivalence to a transition to a low carbon economy led by private investment. The potential to democratically determine the purpose of our labour, or to 'rationally regul[ate our] interchange with Nature', connects the BLF and the Green Bans to the politics of the GND today (Marx 1991). An ecosocialist orientation to the crises we face emphasises the class antagonisms baked into the politics of COVID-19 and climate, and therefore the need for a strategy based in class struggle to win a just transition and recovery.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a response to the COVID-19 crisis that centers on relations between struggles over nature and labour in capitalism. We have argued for an ecosocialist perspective that unites these concerns, and for a renewed conversation about the purpose of our collective labour. In doing so, we can view the COVID-19 and climate crises as different terrains in ongoing class struggle for the social control over our own labour and the production of nature. Instead of drawing inspiration from postwar reconstruction, and plans grounded in nationalism and productivism, we have argued that the spirit and action of the Builders Labourers Federation in the 1970s can provide a North Star for social transformation today; beginning at the worksite, in our homes and on the streets, to not only imagine but to build an ecosocialist world.

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