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Under Review:
Matthew T. Huber. Climate Change as Class War. Building Socialism on a Warming Planet.

Matthew Huber offers a Marxist class analysis of climate change. Part I of his book covers the capitalist class as the main cause of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and climate change; Part II examines the professional class as currently setting the direction of the climate movement; and Part III centers on the argument that the working class instead should play a dominant role in the climate movement to avert continued failure to meet decarbonization goals. In his preceding long introduction Huber makes a preliminary case as to why we should view climate change as class struggle. On his account, the most common conception of climate change is that it results from the “carbon footprints” of billions of consumers, making the struggle against climate change primarily a matter of changing one’s lifestyle toward decarbonized choices and practices, especially among the most affluent consumers. This individualistic ideology has been promoted by fossil fuel capital and serves its interest since the ideology does not challenge its concentrated economic power (13). Huber maintains that climate activists should focus instead on the realm of production and hold industrial owners accountable for continuing to promote carbon-intensive manufacturing and products with high GHG emissions. The working class has the power to disrupt production, and this holds out the promise that once its struggle toward decarbonization takes center stage, it might change the narrative that “the climate movement is losing” (3).
On the basis of Marxist economic theory, Huber contends (in Part I) that industrial capitalists in their drive to increase profits and exploitation were, and still are, the impetus behind production centered on fossil fuels. He writes: “Industrial capital ... is responsible for the bulk of emissions in capitalist society” (61). Accordingly, “We could tackle the core of the [climate] crisis by simply regulating or expropriating the owners of [a] mere handful of industries (electricity, steel, and cement)” (65). In an apparent reference to “carbon footprint” ideologists who view consumers as primarily dictating production and having a shared responsibility for GHG emissions, he continues, “So much for ‘diffuse’ responsibility!” It might be objected that Huber overstates the role of industrial capital: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lists that for 2020, once the GHG emissions of the electric sector are distributed to the other sectors, the economic sector “industry” accounts for 30% of the total U.S. GHG emissions, while the “transportation,” “residential & commercial,” and “agriculture” sectors count for 27%, 31%, and 11%, respectively (https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions). However, this does not really invalidate Huber’s main point that capitalist industrial production is the cornerstone of the climate crisis. After all, industrial capital has had a great impact on how transportation has evolved and how energy is used in residential and commercial buildings. And Huber dedicates a chapter in Part I to discuss how the industrialization of agriculture has made it carbon-intensive (with his main focus on industrial nitrogen fertilizer production). A case could be made that Huber plays down how consumer choice and consent may worsen the climate crisis – for example, the preference of affluent consumers for SUVs has been a significant factor in the growth of GHG emissions in the transportation sector. But Huber is right that calls for reducing individual carbon footprints are ineffective and that collective power is required to push industry toward the decarbonization of the economy.

In Part II, Huber describes the professional class in broad strokes as knowledge workers, as workers with credentials and education, who often embrace meritocratic narratives concerning their own success, and who occupy jobs that, compared to typical working-class jobs, have better pay, some degree of autonomy, or a public service component. The professional class views the deployment of knowledge as pivotal to
winning the climate struggle, not the gradual building of power and mass action. More specifically, the professional class has developed three approaches to combat climate change: the “science communicators” hold that once the people are informed by the science of climate change they will push for decarbonization; the “policy technocrats” think that smart market solutions will overcome opposition by those in power to green politics; and the “anti-system radicals” seek to undermine environmentally destructive capitalist growth by developing small-scale green alternatives (such as living off the grid) and defending policies of anti-consumerism and “degrowth” (123-24).

Huber’s critical analysis of professional class climate politics deserves attention and debate even though it suffers from overgeneralization. Consider his claim that many professionals believe that solving the climate crisis is a matter of spreading objective knowledge. This view might have been common in the early days of the climate movement, but who still believes after years of right-wing climate denial and distortion and decades of oil corporations obscuring their knowledge of climate change that mere knowledge acquisition is power rather than a step in motivating people to struggle for power? Or consider Huber’s contention that from the perspective of people of the professional class who feel “carbon guilt” about their comfortable consumer lifestyles “a politics of less is intuitively appealing,” but for “the majority [who] have experienced the last four decades as increased economic insecurity, stagnating wages, job insecurity, and mounting debt [the] politics of less makes little sense” (147). Huber cites some degrowth environmentalists as criticizing the working class in the richest countries for excessive consumption (and we should grant that this is an ineffective climate change strategy), but a more plausible version of degrowth argues for growth in public transportation, affordable housing, leisure time, etc., while seeking to curtail only the privatized high consumption patterns of affluent consumers that force unsustainable and often unaffordable consumption choices on the majority. Thus degrowth would raise the quality of life for the majority.

In Part III, Huber correctly notes that “a thorny question overhanging this entire book is, of course, who is the working class?” (182). His answer is that the working class, lacking productive ownership, consists of people who (in the words of labor
historian Kim Moody) “must sell their labor power, work more hours than covers their wages, and work under the rule of capital” (182). This characterization seems to include workers of the professional class, but Huber excludes them based on “their relative autonomy in the workplace” (182). What further divides the two classes is their educational level – the working class roughly overlaps with the solid 60 percent of the employed population lacking a bachelor’s degree – and only the working class “is a class that struggles to live” (186). Correspondingly, the working class tends to look at climate change in terms of how it impacts their immediate material needs, while the professional class is guided by more abstract notions such as biodiversity, the idea of the Anthropocene, and the future of humanity.

Huber develops his argument for the indispensability of the working class in two steps. The first step is that support of the working class, as the majority of society, is needed to gain the electoral political power to bring about rapid decarbonization. From this angle, Huber praises the Green New Deal (GND) as a “working-class environmental program” (204) since it appeals to this class and its material needs by offering green proposals that include the creation of millions of high-wage jobs, family leave, medical leave, healthcare for all, paid holidays, and improved union rights. Numerous environmental and climate change groups have supported the GND, and Huber’s account here of why the working class is indispensable for the climate struggle seems rather uncontroversial. However, noting that Bernie Sanders and his promotion of the GND did not receive adequate working class support and that many workers voted for Donald Trump, Huber goes on to argue that a green program attractive to the working class is not enough and that we also need a re-energized working class movement fighting its own battles and learning to trust its own power. Huber continues: “It is this kind of power – the disruptive power of workers whose own labor guarantees the profits flowing to capital – which has the capacity to ‘create a crisis’ for capital and force capitalists into the kind of concessions a Green New Deal represents” (219).

What is questionable here is that the disruptive power conducive to the GND is now ascribed to all working class actions, while earlier Huber emphasized the critical role of the working class as related to its involvement in industrial production. Why should
we view strikes by service workers or sales workers, as compared to non-working class climate actions, as privileged in terms of having the capacity to force industrial capital toward decarbonization? Perhaps Huber would grant this point since his second step of showing the indispensability of the working class is focused on workers in the electric power sector and their potential power to force clean electricity production. To highlight the efficacy of strikes for the climate in the electricity sector, Huber briefly questions the efficacy of school strikes as initiated by Greta Thunberg, noting her professional class background and trust in the power of awareness. Similarly, the disruptive capacity of “direction-action eco-activists” is limited as compared to what electric workers might affect. Huber writes: “ [Eco-activists] succeed in blocking a pipeline here, an oil train there, but fail to put much of a dent in the mass fossil fuel complex at the center of the reproduction of capitalism” (231). Workers in the electricity sector, to the contrary, have the power to bring the economy to a halt. Moreover, since they work in a sector already subject to significant public scrutiny and are heavily unionized, they potentially have the power to make private utilities public, expand the grid through public investment, and adopt clean energy production. This limited “electric socialism” would be pivotal in moving toward a carbon-free economy in light of the central role of electricity in this economy. And struggling toward this aim would also help the realization of the GND (274).

Huber offers three strategies toward “electric socialism.” The first is the “rank-and-file strategy (RFS)” of using small groups of militant workers to steer the majority away from “business unionism” (263-68). These militant groups might emerge from socialist or other radical activists becoming workers in the electricity sector. The RFS is that fellow workers are first approached on basis of such issues as safety and adequate staffing, as steps toward raising broader issues of economic democracy, economic power, etc. The second strategy is to use union resources for political education on the destructiveness of capitalist energy generation and the power of the union to fight for alternatives (268-74). The third strategy is to use “strikes and disruption at the point of production” (274), whereby shutdowns should be a last resort action and work slowdowns, or similarly less drastic actions, would be more common.
In a promotional blurb on the back cover of *Climate Change as Class War*, Mike Davis writes: “The shelves groan with books on the coming apocalypse, but here, at long last, is a concrete strategy for socialists.” This praise has merit and it is important to place more emphasis on the role that the working class might play in decarbonization, but critical questions about Huber’s proposal need to be raised. To mention a few, Huber says that his proposal is designed to meet the urgency of reaching net-zero carbon emissions (219), but would the RFS succeed this fast? Is it tenable that a critical mass of ecological radicals (presumably from the professional class) would become militant electric workers? And if the union workers at large would come to opt for electricity disruption to force deep concessions, how would the public and the state respond? In recent years we have seen an increase in Community Choice Aggregation (CCA), whereby local non-profit public agencies provide cheaper and typically cleaner electricity to local communities. Transmission and distribution remains in the hands of (private) utility companies, but the CCA agencies decide the source of the electricity generation. The public through the electoral process can push CCA agencies toward lower rates and decarbonization. In terms of combatting climate change, what would be the comparative strengths and weaknesses of promoting more and greener CCA agencies (which Huber presumably would reject as a predominantly professional class policy) and the policy of seeking to radicalize the electric unions?

A strength of the GND is that it mobilized many different environment groups behind a comprehensive program. This broad mobilization seems crucial for success in decarbonization, and a problem with Huber’s rejection of all forms of climate activism not rooted in the working class is that it seems obstructive to this mobilization. The same can be said of his rejection of earlier attempts (such as in the work of Jeremy Brecher) to link labor and climate change in terms of “just transition.” On his account, activists who seek justice for workers in how decarbonization may impact their jobs treat workers as marginalized victims rather than agents of change (225 ff.). Huber’s concluding chapter “Species Solidarity at the Climate Crossroads” reinforces this concern of divisiveness. Here Huber argues that Marx saw the proletariat as the universal class, that is, the only class capable of overthrowing capitalism and whose struggle to end its
exploitation would lead to universal emancipation, i.e., the emancipation of humanity or the classless society. Somewhat tentatively, Huber suggests that we should now envision the working class as the universal class of the climate crisis: only members of this class across all nations, unified by "solidarity with species survival," can end the climate crisis caused by fossil fuel capital and usher in global production toward decarbonization and the restoration of the planet. This puts radical climate activists (from other classes) on the sideline unless they become militant (industrial) workers.