



## Climate Crisis and Capitalism

Ecosystems, and the human and animal lives which depend on them, are being destroyed. They are being destroyed and devalued by a capitalist system which allows corporations free reign to exploit resources, people, and the planet for the pursuit of profit. Our current set of political, social, and economic systems are root causes of the climate and ecological crisis, and they are an obstacle to solving it. Tackling the climate and ecological crisis must therefore begin with transforming these systems.

In the past century alone, catastrophic and, at times, irreversible environmental changes have taken place. Our continued economic expansion for the benefit of the top 1% in society has relied on limitless consumption of the earth's natural resources. This consumption is not compatible with tackling climate change or caring for the planet. Infinite growth on a finite planet is idiotic, and the effects of continued economic growth are fueling climate change and violence worldwide.

Western countries have been exploiting resources, environments and people in the Global South for centuries. Despite promising that the free market would bring about untold global prosperity, wealth has become concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. In 2018, 26 individuals owned the same amount of wealth as 3.8 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity, and the rich are only getting richer. We believe that globalisation, and the 'opening up' of markets all over the world, has been a success story for the growth-driven capitalist system, but has come at immense human and ecological cost.

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The globalisation of the world's economy has placed exceptional strain on the ecosystems of countries in the Global South and in particular, lands largely inhabited by indigenous peoples.

Environmental policies, laws and regulations are discriminatory, with many governments and corporations deciding that some groups are structurally expendable. It is no coincidence that the areas facing the most dangerous levels of pollution, highest levels of water contamination, and acting as dumping grounds for toxic waste, tend to be largely inhabited by marginalised communities, such as poor communities and people of colour.

In our race to decarbonise, we must be careful not to reproduce this environmental racism and destruction of ecosystems - for example, in the extraction of lithium used in electric vehicles and batteries.

Capitalism has favoured rich corporate elites and so they have less to fear from climate change because they can afford to adapt to the worst. If their villas in the Maldives sink under water, they can always jet off to their mansions in Canada. Meanwhile those who are the most vulnerable, and the least to blame for the crisis will feel its worst effects. Wealth acts as a safeguard against hunger, homelessness and extreme heat. A just transition requires solidarity with those who are already on the frontline of environmental breakdown and a redistribution of resources from those who created this crisis to those most affected by it.

Beyond the need for decarbonisation, we recognise that the climate emergency is part of a wider problem of socio-ecological injustice and violence. The causes and impacts of climate change are related to other struggles where domination is exerted over an 'other'. To face up to one, we must face up to them all. The system is in direct opposition to human freedoms, and to the planet, which is borderless, interwoven and finite; it can only 'give' so much. Yet the system demands more. We believe that the fight against climate

change intersects directly with the fight against other oppressions, such as racism, misogyny, and ableism.

The systems we live in influence how we view the world. We have put our trust in the mainstream media for honest and balanced views which help educate us on the world around us. But many media channels, particularly those owned by Rupert Murdoch, have exploited this trust to promote their own agendas, suppressing genuine concerns from national discussion. The spread of disinformation on the climate crisis has been sponsored and supported by the fossil fuel industry, who have hired the same lobbyists that spread lies about tobacco to deny, minimize and distort the science of climate change. The distortion of media is part of our current system, and we commend all that take the bold step to see the world on their own terms, moving beyond a focus on the individual, towards a series of interlocking communities from the local to the global. When we change the way we view the world, we change the way we see its problems and solutions as well.

We believe that by tackling our broken economic systems we are not only tackling the sources of the climate crisis, but we are fighting for human freedom, dignity and justice worldwide. There is a climate crisis, an ecosystem in collapse, widespread human rights abuses and a deepening divide in the distribution of wealth and power which is exacerbating a racist, sexist, and oppressive global system. This must end.

## **Failings of the Current System**

To advocate for systems change we must better understand how the current systems have failed us.

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We believe that the dominance of capitalism across the globe is closely linked to environmental destruction, with the great bulldozer of capitalism flattening ecosystems, communities and cultures. These crimes against the environment stem from fundamental capitalist principles, such as perpetual year-on-year growth, and the prioritisation of capital accumulation. The limited resources of our world are thrown into the furnace of capitalism at an increasing rate, so that whole communities, species and habitats are lost. This destruction takes many forms, one of which is the emission of greenhouse gases at an unprecedented level, rapidly warming our planet and disrupting our climate.

Symptoms of the climate breakdown are already present, and will continue to only get worse. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns us that 700 million people could be displaced due to rising sea levels before the end of the century. Life on Earth is facing its 6th mass extinction, with humans having wiped out 60% of all wildlife populations in the last 50 years alone.

In this moment of crisis, the actors in our economic system can only respond with 'business as usual' practices. For example, the apparently ground-breaking environmental legislation by the UK government which creates a legal obligation to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 is not being backed up by concrete action, and we believe it merely pushes the responsibility for action further into the future, onto future generations. We believe that the 2050 net-zero target is far too late, it lacks any specific measures and fails to provide or prepare for a just transition. We believe that a reliance on negative emissions technologies, which barely exist today, is simply a way for the system to avoid substantial action. We need to transition to carbon neutrality much sooner than this target - every passing moment without action is a moment wasted, and condemns ever greater numbers of people to bear the brunt of climate violence. The

powerful classes seeking to preserve the status quo only make environmental progress when they can profit from it. The system cannot change itself, the crisis cannot be solved within the current system, so the system must be changed.

We cannot escape our role in this. We, especially the most privileged in the Global North, are part of this system. Yet narratives placing blame and the burden of responsibility for action on individual consumers attempt to shift focus from the reality that just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, among the most profitable private corporations in the world, oil companies such as Exxon Mobil and Shell spend millions to suppress climate change action.

The view from within the heart of our system is currently a grim one. Capitalism increasingly seeks to dominate all aspects of society in the pursuit of short term profit. We see the attacks on wider society in the name of 'the free market' or 'competition', and the damage this has caused to our ecosystems and social fabric. The spread of neoliberalism has meant privatisation and attacks on working class solidarity, lessening our ability to fight back. We see how it has created oppressive structures and forms of inequality which act as a barrier to solving the climate crisis. Societal spaces which were once free to all have been under attack; libraries and community spaces are under strain, green spaces privatised and gated. We believe this has resulted in our exposure to the natural world becoming commodified, and our public spaces becoming private. This punishes those who can least afford it, and can mask the real damage that our resource use is inflicting. In this way, capitalism has hollowed out our wider society, like a parasite within a host body.

As written in the UKYCC blog series, capitalism has embedded in our society an extractive culture of exploitation, of people and of the

planet. We recognise that this exploitation breaks down further into many intersectional categories of discrimination. Additionally, we believe it is important to recognise capitalist exploitation beyond the environment to ensure that movements such as a 'green industrial revolution' do not repeat the same mistakes. Attacks on labour unions in the UK and the exploitation of workers are linked to the abuse of the environment in that they came about by the defining principles of capitalism. Therefore, tackling the climate crisis is also an opportunity to solve these injustices caused by capitalism, and especially by the modern hyper-financialised neoliberal brand of capitalism pioneered in the Global North, and forced upon those in the Global South.

A new system must work against racism, sexism, and transcend the competitive race-to-the-bottom defining capitalist development. We look to build upon a society recognising the privileges and injustices present in the current system, to promote true sustainability, democracy and equality, and to bin the idea of infinite economic growth. We believe by breaking down the workings and injustices of our current society, a more just system can be built in its place.

## **What a different system could look like**

We believe that there is no one answer to what a new system will look like, and it is clear that as we move forward, we will create something new and unique. We have examples to build on; existing new approaches from the Global South; teachings from indigenous peoples; stories from history, and many lessons to learn. Societal change is a bottom-up process, not a blueprint implemented from above.

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However, if we take sustainability, justice and participative-governance as key principles, then we can start to sketch out not only the architecture of a new system, but also which steps we should take to get there.

Learning from other examples shows us the power of organisation and community, how the strength of what we refer to as 'civil society' can create deep resilience and encourage emotional fulfilment within community members. We believe a new system must allow communities to reclaim the areas of our lives we have lost to corporate consumerism. We are losing our relationship with nature, with the food we eat, and the land we live upon, in turn degrading our relationship with others and ourselves. This is the beginning of what we mean by democracy, or participative governance. Not a narrow, western definition of democracy, but a wide, participative, communal consensus. A citizen community is the foundation of a new political system within which the voices of all are not only heard but listened to. It is linked to justice, as the inequalities obvious in our current system are built upon, and moreover enabled by, systemic racism and sexism, as well as other oppressions such as ableism, and ageism. These structural inequalities must be challenged to begin to build a new system.

Secondly, we believe that a reordering of society based on cooperation instead of competition could deliver a radical realigning of power in society. The only way to rationalise much of the current economic power system is to disregard our community ties, and to imagine ourselves and others as individuals only. Cooperatives are enterprises in which the productive power of capitalism is made to serve to the benefit of the workers and society at large. We can empower ourselves and our communities through a democratisation of organised productive power, and build resilience at the same time.

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We believe that instead of the competitive “us vs. them”, we can operate sustainably in the “we depend on you, and you depend on us” model also known as “Unbuntu”, rewriting the relations we have with wider nature. It empowers us to see past the short-term economic benefits of deforestation, and appreciate the unquantifiable value of the forest, and a healthy global ecosystem. The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa believes Ubuntu can be a mantra for the global climate justice movement, because more than anything else, the climate agenda is truly global.

We think it’s important not to view this potential new set of societal systems as operating in a vacuum, somehow isolated from historical context. Global inequalities, much the product of colonialism and violent destruction, are ever present and thus a new system must take these into account. The history of and current state of colonialism is yet another system which needs dismantling, and rebuilding upon democratic and sustainable lines. It is a good example of why ‘level playing fields’ are blind to historic inequalities, but also how democratising decision-making up and out to a global level can ensure that these views are properly heard by all.

These ‘systems’ can seem foggy, and hard to define. For example, human agriculture is responsible for a large slice of global emissions, habitat loss, and animal extinction. It is also responsible for the impoverishment of communities forced by the labour market into sub-subsistence farming or unsustainable cash-cropping. However, this is not to say that it is agriculture as a whole which is the problematic ‘system’. Looking closely, in areas across the globe where the shadow of capitalism can be found, there is an intense concentration of capital and land in the hands of a wealthy few. This means that the possibilities for democratic and collective ownership are disregarded, wider benefits other than the short term profit

motive are ignored, and agricultural practices that support farm workers as well as ecosystem restoration are impossible. This is just one example of how we need to realign the agricultural system with our basic needs, for sustenance, for worker security, and for the health of our citizens and ecosystems.

We know that these new systems will need to be built from the ground up. They must support sustainable and democratic societies built upon founding principles of justice, such that they tackle the racist, sexist, competitive practices which are a core part of the current capitalist system. New systems can be democratic, they can centre the citizen as part of the global community, not as a nationalistic consumer, or a chaser of short term private profit.

## **Movements that tackle systems change**

The idea of organising for systems change is not new. We draw inspiration from past and existing movements to change the way in which social, political and economic systems function and relate to each other and to the environment.

A critically important struggle is currently occurring in Wet'sewet'un traditional lands. The Canadian government and private interests are currently pushing to develop a gas pipeline through these lands, against the express wishes of the Wet'suwet'un community. No consent has been given, no due process has been sought. The peaceful protests against this infringement, this invasion, represent a critical intersection of traditional land rights, vested fossil-fuel interests, and of the challenge of a just transition.

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In the US, the Green New Deal - proposed legislation that would trigger wide-scale economic transformation in order to tackle inequality and drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions well into the future - is shaping national discussion. Calls are growing for similar legislation in the UK, where the idea was originally born in 2008. It is based upon the idea that there are serious problems with the current financial system, and that it must be overhauled to ensure a radical transition to a sustainable future. Political terms such as a 'Green New Deal' are quickly emptied of their original meaning and with them any capacity for systems change. Careful thought must be put into any economic transformation that is on the back of the financial system which has done so much to push environmental and community degradation.

A large coalition of NGOs came together ahead of the 2018 UNFCCC negotiations, bringing the "People's Demands For Climate Justice" to negotiators' attention. These demands include keeping fossil fuels in the ground, acknowledgement by developed countries of their role in causing the climate crisis, and advancement of clean, equitable solutions. The demands represent a union of groups around the world pushing towards just and transparent climate policy and action.

As a youth-led organisation, we've drawn huge inspiration from the 'Fridays for Future' youth movement inspired by Greta Thunberg. Young people have come together globally in an unprecedented series of protests and 'school strikes', with the aim of highlighting the unfolding climate crisis, and calling on governments to act. Whilst climate protests are often ignored by the media, the youth climate strikes and Thunberg's words in particular, continue to gain more media coverage.

"We are the 99%" is the iconic slogan of the Occupy movement,

which since 2011 has sought to highlight the stark inequality and the growing domination of the financial industry in politics. The Occupy movement rapidly spread in 2011, its message amplified through its savvy use of social media and occupation of key spaces in the global political and financial system such as Wall Street. One of the movement's strengths is the tailoring of its messages by local activists to their circumstances and the solidarity actions it has taken, such as providing food, shelter and other support to those affected by Hurricane Sandy.

In 1999, a “Water War” took place in Cochabamba Bolivia, which saw the attempted privatization of that city's water systems, as well as all ground water, by international companies. Broad sections of society mobilised against the privatization, including women campesinos and others who had frequently been marginalised in union-based organising. The anti-privatization movement was successful and the Bolivian government reversed privatization. However, one of the international water companies involved, Betchel, sought to sue the Bolivian government through the World Trade Organization (WTO). Cochabamba's people organised a huge international campaign of protests, emails and petitions, which led to Betchel climbing down

However, there are still gaps when it comes to ensuring that new movements for systems change are inclusive and do not unwittingly support the very structures that they are trying to dismantle.

## **Being Conscientious Systems Changers**

We believe it is imperative that activist groups such as ourselves are conscious about the wider implications of our movements. As we

have set out above, the current system relies on racism, sexism, ableism and classism as well as other forms of oppression all over the globe. To bring about systems change, all aspects of oppression need to be addressed and must not be overlooked.

Therefore, we state that with all our movements, communications and organisation, we will endeavour to ensure that no group in society feels our actions are non-inclusive\* or in anyway disregard the importance of people's perspective of oppression or privilege. Although we seek to be an inclusive and diverse movement we want to make explicitly clear that we do not wish to represent or give space to those whose actions perpetuate discrimination or oppressions, including but not limited to racism, homophobia, sexism or ableism. We acknowledge that this is a learning process and that we will make mistakes. We encourage critique and will take all critiques seriously. We commit to responding with openness and to be ready to reflect and learn. This is not a commitment we take lightly. Building a movement which challenges all forms of oppression and cultivating radical empathy will require us to always be reflecting, learning, working, educating and caring for ourselves and for everyone.

## **How UKYCC will be supporting Systems Change**

UKYCC takes systems change seriously and will be working to place systems change at the heart and centre of our campaigns and values. We will work hard to represent a diversity of voices, stand in solidarity with campaigns for social and racial justice, and dedicate our campaigning to fight for systemic change that combats not only climate change but structural oppression too. Our campaigns will

push for systems change in several ways.

Firstly, UKYCC will fight to promote marginalised voices in the often inaccessible and privileged world of climate change decision-making. This means empowering those who are and will be most affected by climate change – particularly youth and peoples of the Global South – to attend and meaningfully participate in the UN’s annual climate summits known as the Conference of the Parties (COP). We will challenge corporations whose business models do not deliver on socio-economic justice, and who monopolise policy discussions. This means ensuring that the climate and ecological crises cannot be ignored by politicians, and ensuring that the youth are recognised as an indispensable electoral group. We will use our social media and network of contacts to highlight the stories of those on the front lines of climate change and their ideas on how we might transform society.

The second way UKYCC will work towards systems change is by building the capacity of young people and other marginalised groups to challenge the entrenched interests that stand in the way of climate justice. We will help to develop a network of radical youth and other civil society voices who together can develop the ideas and institutions that will be needed for a zero-carbon and socially just world. To do this we will provide spaces where young people can share ideas and we will collaborate with other organisations to build challenging campaigns.

Thirdly, we will identify and challenge the vested interests and outdated institutions that stand in the way of a rapid and just transition. This will mean identifying the institutional structures, laws and priorities, such as GDP and increasing shareholder value, that lock us into a carbon-intensive and socially exploitative economic model. It will also mean working out who is profiting from

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environmental breakdown and social austerity, and using colourful and challenging campaigns to shine a light on their practices.

Finally, working with other youth groups, social justice campaigners and trade unions, we will nurture and build alternative ideas that can deliver a more equal, free and regenerative society. We have already sketched out some ideas in the last blog in [our series on systems change](#). In this way, we will help show that a systems change approach to climate and ecological crisis is politically possible, socially desirable and environmentally-vital.