

# be realistic



# demand the impossible

AN ANARCHIST CONTRIBUTION

TO THE

HASTINGS GREEN AND SOCIALIST CONFERENCE

16.9.89



### INTRODUCTION.

In every society based upon exploitation and oppression from the Pharaoh's Egypt to Thatcher's Britain there has been a current of resistance which has expressed itself in many different ways and which in theory and practice proposes that things could be otherwise - that freedom and equality are possible. In the 19th and 20th centuries this current has come to be known as socialism, communism or anarchism. It is ironic indeed that wherever parties calling themselves "Socialist" or "Communist" have come to power society has not moved towards freedom and equality - far from it.

This is one of the reasons why many of us reject political parties and the use of state power as methods of achieving socialism.

Recent years have seen the rise of a movement which has come to realise that the present state of affairs as well as being unjust is also physically unsustainable, is rapidly destroying and polluting nature with drastic consequences for the planets inhabitants both human and non-human. This "green" movement is extremely diverse and includes groups which range from radical direct action groups like "Sea Shephard", the Animal Liberation Front and Earth First! right through to reactionary bureaucracies like the World Wildlife Fund. The green movement has also given rise to political parties.

Many of us see the electoralism of the "green" parties as being no more likely to bring about a sustainable society than "Socialist" and "Communist" parties are to bring about socialism.

However there are many people who are active in all areas of both the "green" and "socialist" movements who are coming to see that the desire for social justice and the desire for a sustainable human society are linked. Indeed it seems to me that the two are inseparable.

Debate is essential if we are to create a movement capable of bringing about the changes that are necessary and establishing a free, equal and sustainable world society.

So the Hastings Green and Socialist Conference is very welcome. The organisers have put forward four areas of discussion two of which are "Economic Growth" and "Capitalism or Industrialism" which are put forward as a series of questions. In this small contribution I have attempted to answer those questions from an anarchist point of view. I make no claim to originality, all the ideas expressed are commonplace in the anarchist movement, however I speak only for myself not necessarily for any other individuals, groups or organisations.

Steve.



## HOW DO WE DEFINE GROWTH ? IS IT POSSIBLE OR DESIRABLE ?

Clearly growth is possible. The whole history of the human race from the onset of civilisation is one of growth; growth of population, growth of the area of land used by human beings either for dwellings or agriculture, growth of our knowledge about the universe, growth of our ability to manipulate nature through technology. Since the "Industrial Revolution" the increase in the production of commodities has never ceased (except locally and temporarily) and industrialism has now spread to virtually every corner of the earth. And the technological capability for further growth certainly exists, indeed new avenues for industrial growth are opening up; genetic engineering, space exploration, nuclear fusion etc etc.

Is this desirable ? Well it seems almost self evident to me that the kind of growth the human race has created up until now is not desirable. Every form of civilisation from the pre-Egyptian city state to the present day has been, for the majority, a nightmare of oppression and exploitation. Every civilisation has also been destructive of nature and exploitative of other species.

Although schematic ways of looking at things are always to a certain extent misleading and inaccurate I think it is broadly correct to point to four forms of human existence which roughly succeed each other although obviously overlapping.

1. The state of nature. In which our ancestors lived for the majority of the human race's existence from the emergence of Homo Sapiens as a species until the onset of civilisation. Few people now remain even close to this condition - the bushmen, native Amazonians, perhaps a few others, the rest having been exterminated or absorbed into civilisation. Such societies are characterised by pure communism, lack of hierarchy and a sustainable relationship with nature.

2. The slave states - Egypt, Greece, Rome etc etc. Their major contributions to the world were slavery, imperialism, mass warfare, "Art", "Religion" and "Philosophy".

3. Feudalism - which in western europe gives rise to merchantilism, modern imperialism and eventually to capitalism/industrialism.

4. Capitalism/industrialism which is what we have today. Despite real, imagined and pretended conflicts between nation states, ideologies and industrial corporations it can be seen as one world encompassing system.

Each of these stages "grows" out of the preceding one with massive increases in population, production of artefacts, the area of land exploited by the human race, the number of human "roles" etc etc.

Looking around us at the result of several thousand years of growth, a world of starvation, pollution, the extermination of animal and plant species, war, oppression etc etc, how could we say that we want more of the same ?

## IS IT POSSIBLE TO REORGANISE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION TO ENABLE THE CREATION OF NEW JOBS AND THE REBUILDING OF THE WELFARE STATE WITHOUT USING UP FINITE RESOURCES ?

Is full employment and a "welfare state" really what we want ? To have a "job" is to be exploited and to be subject to management (in other words to be denied control over the means of production). To talk of "jobs" implies the continuation of wage labour and the money economy and hence the continuation of inequality. The "welfare state" is a vast bureaucracy for the containment, control and harassment of the poor. Shouldn't we be aiming a bit higher ?

What we should be working towards is a society where people can decide collectively what work is necessary and how it should be carried out, where there is equal access



for all to the goods and services produced by society and where workplaces are directly under the control of those who work in them in consultation with the wider community. In such a society terms like "jobs" and "welfare state" will cease to have meaning.

The question is if we can create such a world can we organise it in such a way that it will be sustainable ? For a human society to be sustainable we need to reduce the amount of land, energy and resources that we use. With the abolition of capitalism and the state huge areas of human activity would obviously cease : All financial services such as banking, investment, insurance, accounting etc etc. Advertising and marketing. Arms production and the armed services. The machinery of so-called "justice", police, the judiciary, solicitors, courts, prisons. Bureaucracies like the civil service. Management as a separate function. I hope it is obvious that the ending of all these useless activities and the dedication of all human efforts to the fulfilment of genuine needs and desires would have two effects. Firstly the great reduction of time needed to be spent by each individual on keeping society going and secondly a great reduction in the use of finite resources and energy. It should not be difficult to reduce energy consumption to the point where renewable sources would be sufficient.

The biggest short to medium term contribution towards a reduction of the amount of land used by the human race would be to end our exploitation of other species of animal for food. It takes 100 lb of feed to produce 30 lb of eggs, 7 lb of cereals to produce 1 lb of beef. So we are wasting land growing crops to feed to animals. If this country were to adopt a veganic (no animals, no animal products) method of food production not only would we be able to feed ourselves rather than having to import food but we would still be able to allow much land to return to nature.

When, but only when, we have abolished capitalism and the state we will be able, together, to create a world which is sustainable as well as free and equal.

#### WHAT IS MEANT BY ALTERNATIVE INDICATORS TO G.N.P. ?

The Nation is certainly Gross and so are most of it's Products!

#### IS A VISION OF THE FUTURE WITH EVER INCREASING MATERIAL LIVING STANDARDS COMPATIBLE WITH CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE THIRD WORLD ?

Not if we define "material living standards" in the normal accepted way that it is used by politicians and the media. The so-called "high" standard of living in the affluent nations is only possible because of centuries of imperialism, colonialism and ruthless destruction of nature. The way of life of the affluent nations is based upon slavery, genocide, theft of natural resources, exploitation of non-human animals, deforestation etc etc. A vision of the future which is based upon more cars, more roads, faster and bigger aeroplanes, more foreign holidays, more and more consumer gadgets etc etc is not possible without continued and increasing exploitation and oppression of people (especially in the poor countries) and destruction of nature.

However there is another way of looking at the kind of life that people lead which might better be stated as "quality of life" rather than "living standards". Quality of life depends on having the basic necessities of life, living in a healthy environment, having socially useful and enjoyable work, having happy relations with those around you, not feeling anxious, threatened or harassed, having opportunities to learn and develop etc etc not upon the acquisition of large numbers of commodities.

If we are to create a world-wide free, equal and sustainable human society then the affluent part of the world must stop it's pollution and destruction of nature and it must also stop it's parasitism on the rest of the world and make repayment for it's past crimes against the world's population. Resources, time and effort must be turned away from militarism and producing "high standards of living" for some towards making sure that every person on the planet is well fed, well housed, has access to clean water, health care, education etc etc. This does mean that the lives of those of us who live in



what are now the affluent nations will change. In terms of the current measure of "standard of living" we may well be "poorer" but our quality of life will be much better. For a start there will be no rich and poor, no one will have to worry about the basics like food, clothing, shelter. No one will be forced into work which doesn't suit them, people won't have to work 40, 50 or 60 hours a week if they don't want to and people will have genuine control over their places of work. No one will have to worry about the possibility of war or persecution. Land will be a "common treasury for all" not the preserve of wealthy landowners or the state, hopefully large tracts will be able to return to their natural condition - as well as being good for the earth and other species this will provide more chances for people to experience the beauty and tranquility of nature. If people no longer eat animal products because it entails destruction of the environment, is inefficient and exploits our fellow creatures then they will be healthier.

We must not fall for the lie that fast cars, foreign holidays and gadgets are what make life worthwhile.

Ending human poverty, ending the destruction of nature and improving our own quality of life are all linked and in no way contradictory - all of them can only be achieved by the global overthrow of capitalism and the state.

#### CAN WE ABANDON GROWTH AND STILL BE SOCIALIST ?

If by socialist we mean something like "committed to equality and self-management" then we certainly can. What is needed to produce socialism in this sense is not growth but redistribution. Given collective control of the means of production at either their present or a greatly reduced level there is no reason at all why there should not be an excellent quality of life for all in this country or in any of the affluent nations. On the world level we must end the obscene inequality between the affluent and the poor parts of the world. This cannot be achieved by more industrial growth, it can only be achieved by making an end to economic and military imperialism and through land reform and appropriate technology in the currently poor parts of the world.

#### HOW CAN ENVIRONMENTALISM BE EQUATED WITH ISSUES OF POVERTY, RACISM, SEXISM AND OTHER FORMS OF OPPRESSION ?

Single issue politics is always dangerous in that it can produce a sort of tunnel vision which sees one form of oppression or injustice as more important than and/or totally separate from all others. It is the same system which destroys the environment, causes poverty, treats races as inferior and perpetuates sexism. If we see all these things as being linked and struggle to end all forms of oppression and inequality while accepting that for various reasons we will all at times concentrate on different issues there is no contradiction.

Environmentalism can easily become worthless or reactionary if it is seen as an isolated end in itself. All sorts of people can be concerned about the degradation of the environment and the ill-effects it may have on them including people who believe whole-heartedly in the capitalist system which produced this mess in the first place. So if you are wealthy you can do all sorts of "environmentally sound" things ; buy the most efficient water filters which are incredibly expensive, stick a solar panel on the roof, live in the middle of the country where the air is fresher, eat only organic food etc etc but if you are poor you don't have so many options. Besides which none of these private "solutions" alter the situation - a social change is needed.

Likewise other "issues" if taken in isolation can easily become reactionary, take for example anti-sexism ; the women's movement produced a devastating critique of the oppression of women in this society and launched a struggle against it which was, of necessity, for the most part anti-capitalist and libertarian. However the notion of "equal rights for women", with which I hope we all agree, can be interpreted in such a way that it supports rather than opposes the "status quo" ; so it is seen as being a "good thing" if there are more women bank managers, judges, stock brokers etc etc, if women are allowed to carry arms in the police or armed services, if a woman becomes Prime Minister.



We can only end each injustice and oppression by ending the system that produces every injustice and oppression.

#### HOW DOES ENVIRONMENTALISM MEET THE ASPIRATIONS OF THE POOR FOR GREATER WELL-BEING ?

If "environmentalism" is adopted by capitalism, which to a certain extent it will be, then it goes without saying that the aspirations of the poor will not be met. Material well-being for all can only be gained through the global overthrow of capitalism and the state and the creation of a society based on common ownership and direct democracy. This is also the only way to end the destruction of nature and create a sustainable economy. At the moment land and the means of production are owned and controlled by tiny elites of individuals, corporations and governments who in effect make all relevant decisions in what they see as being their own interests to the detriment of the planet and most of its inhabitants. It is only when that power is swept aside by the vast majority of people that we can begin to create a sustainable human society.

#### CAN THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS BE ATTRIBUTED TO INDUSTRIAL, URBAN AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES COMMON TO THE CAPITALIST AND COMMUNIST BLOCS, OR IS A SEPERATE ANALYSIS OF CAPITALISM REQUIRED ?

Ever since human beings ceased to live in a sustainable relationship with nature (based on gathering/hunting and small-scale gardening) civilisation has destroyed and polluted nature. To give an example the deforestation of this country and the extermination of much of its wildlife (boar, wolf, wildcat etc etc) was completed well before modern capitalism/industrialism appeared on the scene. The crisis we have today is one of intensity and scale. This crisis is a direct result of capitalism/industrialism which requires huge amounts of energy to fuel it and by its very nature produces large amounts of toxic waste products.

The question implies that there are communist countries - there are not. The U.S.S.R., China, Cuba etc etc are all capitalist societies. They have all the features of capitalism ; wage labour, inequalities of wealth and power, hierarchy, taxation, separate management functions etc etc. The fact that the state is the "owner" of all or most of the capital does not mean that capitalism has ceased to exist. If anything the exploitation of the working-class and peasantry has been more brutal in the so-called "Communist" countries which is why they have required ferocious police states to maintain "order". Even so their economies have been failures in capitalist terms which is why they are now shifting towards a more "liberal", "western" form of capitalism.

If we succeed in creating a society based on freedom and equality and are looking at how to build a sustainable relationship with nature then the big question is going to be "how much industry can we retain ?" I suspect that most heavy, mass, modern (post "industrial revolution") industry will have to go or be radically transformed. Examples of things which I think would have to go are the private motor car, the chemical industry, aeroplanes (to be replaced with non-polluting, comfortable, slow airships) and engine driven ships (a return to sail, no more noise pollution for whales to put up with). A sustainable economy will have to be based on small-scale organic "agriculture" and renewable energy sources.

#### CAN PROBLEMS OF RESOURCE SCARCITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE BE RESOLVED WITHOUT TACKLING THE SYSTEM OF PRIVATE OWNERSHIP AND THE NEED FOR STATE INTERVENTION ?

No, because it is capitalism (private ownership) and the state which protects it that got us into this mess. If we are going to deal with problems of resource scarcity and environmental damage, in other words create a sustainable economy, then it is necessary that the land, the means of production, housing, transportation etc etc be collectively owned and controlled. How can we possibly make decisions about the future of our planet if everything is run by tiny unaccountable cliques ?



WHAT ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF COMMON OWNERSHIP ARE THERE, BESIDES NATIONALISED INDUSTRIES AND CENTRALISED PLANNING AS THEY HAVE EXISTED ?

Well, let's start by admitting that in terms of moving towards the sort of free, equal and sustainable world that we would like to see nationalisation and central planning have been, to put it politely, unremitting failures. Nationalised industries carry on polluting just as they did when they were in private hands, look at the C.E.G.B., water boards and the coal industry. Workers in nationalised industries have no more say over the running of their workplaces than they would in any private firm, their wages aren't even appreciably better in most cases. Nationalised industries behave just as badly towards their "customers" as would any private firm, think of the electricity or gas boards cutting off pensioners in the middle of winter when those pensioners are supposed in some way to "own" those industries. Centralised planning in the U.S.S.R. and China led to mass starvation.

So what shall we have instead? To a large extent this will have to be worked out in practice as we get rid of the old system and start creating a new society ; rigid blueprints for the future have never worked and have caused untold misery. However we can make the general statement that "common ownership" must mean common control as well. So whereas nationalisation and central planning have just been forms of state control we must bring all aspects of social life (production, transport, housing, health-care, education etc etc) under the direct control of the community itself. The key to this is going to be decentralisation ; it is impossible to run an industry like the C.E.G.B. on direct democratic lines, it is quite difficult (although possible) to run a large factory on direct democratic lines but on the other hand a small workshop or a small farm present few problems since decisions can usually be made on a convivial, face to face basis. So wherever possible we must aim at smaller units of production. Work in such smaller units will be more pleasant and creative anyway, who would freely choose to work on a production line ? In the sort of society we are aiming at whole industries will have been more or less abolished (e.g. armaments, the private motor car, chemicals) and what is left will be what the community has decided is necessary and desirable. In a sense everything will be owned by the community but the day to day running of individual workplaces will be wholly in the hands of those who work there. It will be up to the workers how they make decisions but there won't be any need for a permanent, separate strata of management. What administration is necessary could be carried out by elected delegates (not representatives) or simply carried out in rotation. Industries which need to be organised on a large scale and over large distances (such as transport and communications) may need to have permanent bodies of delegates to carry out research, co-ordination and planning. However such bodies could not assume a position of power towards the workers in that industry or the wider community since delegates, unlike representatives, can be recalled at any time should they not be carrying out the wishes of those who sent them. Anyway delegates will usually be elected on a short term basis to carry out a particular job, certainly no one would be permitted to become a permanent or semi-permanent delegate since then they would be becoming a manager or representative.

The principal of running all aspects of society, not just production, must be that decisions are made by those that they effect. This means real local power. When decisions have to be made that effect large areas and/or large numbers of people delegates (not representatives) can be elected to discuss the possibilities and report back before the decision is made, hopefully by consensus but by a vote if necessary. This is the principal of power from the base up, or federalism, as opposed to power from the top down, or hierarchy and centralism, which is what we have to put up with at present. Some people would no doubt object that we live in a democracy and so we all have a say in what goes on already but the notion of "representative" democracy is just a con-trick. For a start much real power does not lie with parliaments and elected governments but with the C.B.I. and other employer organisations, the banks, MI 5, the armed forces, chief constables and the police force, multi-nationals etc etc who are elected by nobody. Anyway the absurd pretence that 600 or so people can somehow (however they are elected) "represent" the millions of individuals who live in these islands would be laughable if it weren't so dangerous and damaging.



People find it very difficult to accept this vision of a world being run by people themselves without management, hierarchy and authority mainly because they try to imagine it in the context of our present complex, centralised, mass, highly industrialised society. A much simpler, decentralised society based on renewable energy, small scale organic "agriculture" and a minimal industrial infrastructure could easily organise all aspects of social life on the basis of self-management and direct democracy.

CAN WE JUST GET ELECTED TO POWER AND LEGISLATE FOR CHANGE, OR WOULD WE FACE VIOLENT RESISTANCE ? HOW WOULD WE DEAL WITH THIS ?

State power and the organised violence on which it rests is part of the problem that we face, in no way can it be part of the solution. The state is not some neutral institution which can be used by anyone who gets hold of it for any purpose they wish ; the modern nation state emerged historically in order to defend the interests of capitalism/industrialism. The upper (and in many cases secret) echelons of the British state are occupied by members of the ruling-class who have deep seated loyalties to such things as Monarchy, Imperialism, Capitalism and Patriarchy but who pay only lip-service (if that) to the notion of representative democracy. There can be no doubt whatsoever that if an elected government in this country did attempt to implement genuinely socialist or radical green policies the ruling-class and the state would attempt to crush that government by a coup, possibly backed by an invasion of American or N.A.T.O. forces. If anyone doubts this scenario then consider the fact that the ruling-class considered the Wilson government dangerous enough to launch a MI 5 led conspiracy to undermine it!

It is therefore dishonest and dangerous to try and persuade people that we can achieve a free and equal society and/or a sustainable economy by parliamentary means.

We must try to build a huge, diverse, popular movement for liberation which sees quite clearly that the state in all its manifestations is part of the system we have to get rid of. Such a movement will, of course, still face violent resistance from the state. In fact people who struggle for genuine change (whether they be peace activists, squatters, hunt saboteurs, strikers or whatever) already face that violence. No way will the system allow itself to be abolished without using violence to keep its power so we must be prepared to defend ourselves. The key to victory will be numbers ; if sufficient people refuse to go along with the system, do what they can to disrupt it, start building alternatives, keep a clear vision of the sort of society they wish to create and are prepared to defend themselves from attacks by the state then we can win.

Even if we achieved something like the sort of society we would like to see in one country (say Britain) we would face attack from other nations still under capitalism/industrialism whose rulers would not wish to see an example which might encourage the rest of the world's population to struggle even harder for change. Of course we would have to resist but we would almost certainly fail. The oppression and destruction we face is international and so must be the revolution that will end it, we must never forget that we are part of an international movement and we must always be prepared to offer solidarity to those fighting the system wherever they may be. "Socialism in one country" is impossible and likewise it will be impossible to create islands of sustainability in a world ravaged by capitalism/industrialism.

WHAT ANSWERS ARE PROVIDED BY THE CONCEPT OF "CLASS STRUGGLE" ?

Class struggle is not something which began with capitalism/industrialism and the creation of the working-class. Since the beginning of civilisation human society has been stratified, hierarchical. Small groups or individuals have always held power over the majority. These small groups or individuals (whether they be Pharaohs, Emperors, Popes, Kings or Capitalists) have also always been incredibly wealthy while the powerless majority have always been, surprise, surprise, poor. This is because the rich and powerful become rich and powerful by exploiting and oppressing everybody else. The poor and powerless majority are kept in line by a combination of violence and mystification, in the past mystification consisted mainly of religion, nowadays religion has been mostly



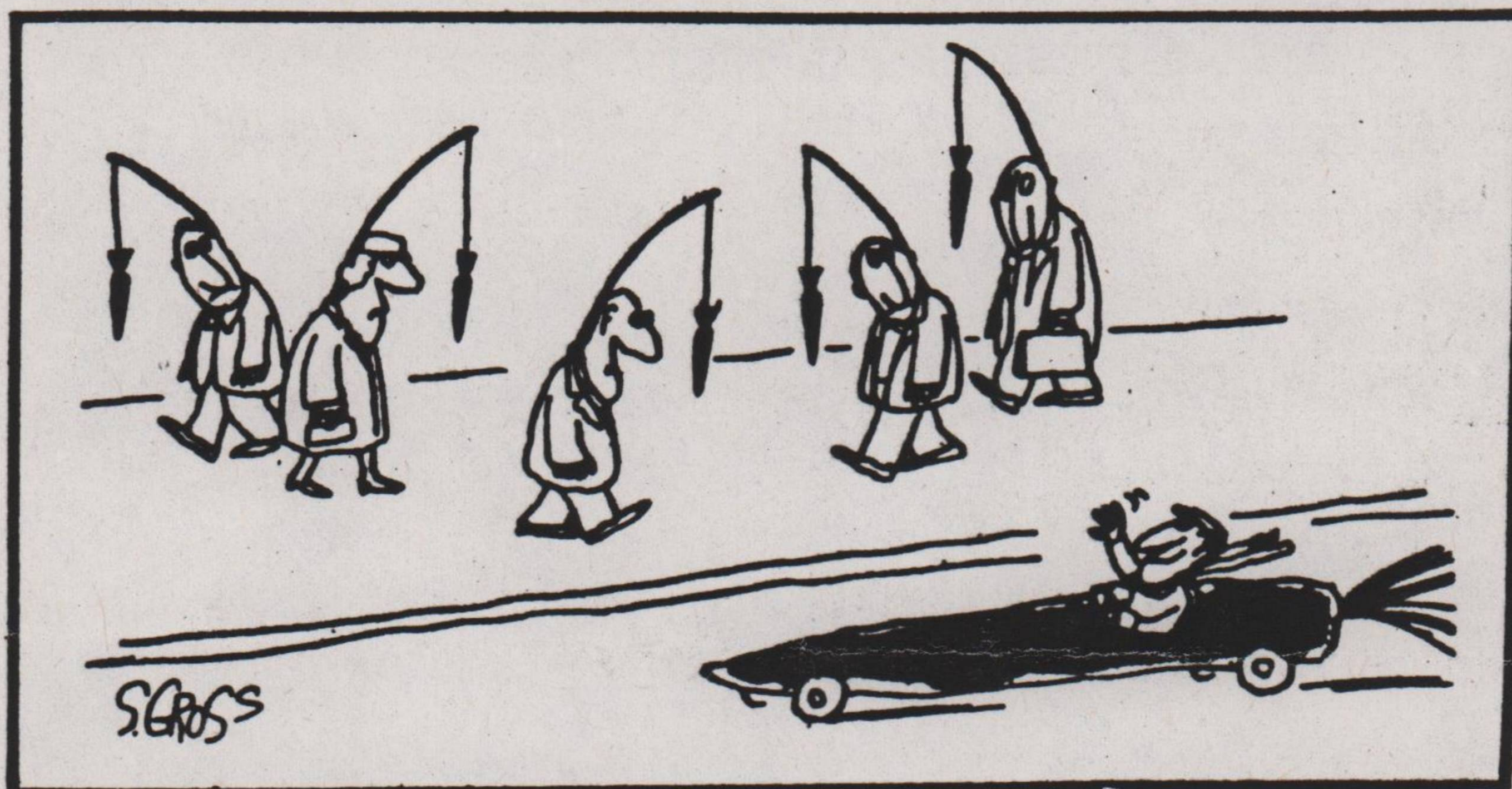
replaced (at least in the affluent nations) by advertising, education and the mass media.

Not suprisingly the people who are not rich and powerful have never been overly keen on this arrangement and have resisted through (in roughly chronological order) slave revolts, peasant uprisings, food riots, machine breaking, strikes and insurrections. This is class struggle. It has always been driven partly by rage at present conditions and partly by a vision of a better sort of world.

The struggle for a free and equal world with a sustainable economy is bound to be a struggle against those who have wealth and power by the rest of us. It is in large part a class struggle. Remember that it is out of the class struggle that the vision of a better world has emerged. We must involve ourselves both in the class struggle and in struggles around green issues and try and link them up. After all if workers start to act, in their workplaces, for a greener world then we will be taking a big step forward. Remember it was industrial action by seafarers that stopped the dumping of nuclear waste at sea - not Greenpeace.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO IMPLEMENT GREEN POLICIES IN A CAPITALIST STATE ?

NO!





# Deadmen

YOU MEN WHO HIDE FROM THE TRUTH,  
THAT HEAR ONLY THAT  
WHICH ECHOES YOUR OWN OPINIONS,  
YOU THINK YOU'VE HEARD IT ALL,  
YOU'VE HEARD NOTHING.

YOU MEN THAT DENY SPIRIT,  
THAT FEEL THAT LIFE WITHOUT EXPENSIVE TOYS  
AND HABITS IS BORING,  
YOU THINK YOU'VE FELT IT ALL,  
YOU'VE FELT NOTHING.

YOU MEN WHO DISRESPECT LIFE,  
THAT SEE ALL OF THE EARTH  
THAT CAN'T BE MADE TO SERVE YOU AS BARREN,  
YOU THINK YOU'VE SEEN IT ALL.  
YOU'VE SEEN NOTHING.

YOU MEN THAT LIVE FOR WEALTH,  
THAT PERCEIVE ALL THAT CAN'T BE BOUGHT  
AND SOLD AS WORTHLESS,  
YOU THINK YOU HAVE IT ALL,  
YOU HAVE NOTHING.

YOU MEN WHO LUST FOR POWER,  
THAT BELIEVE THAT EVERYONE HAS THEIR PRICE  
AND JUDGE PEOPLES VALUE ON THEIR WILLINGNESS TO OBEY,  
YOU THINK YOU KNOW IT ALL,  
YOU KNOW NOTHING.

Gerry Hannah

(One of the "Vancouver Five" imprisoned for "crimes"  
against the military industrial complex in Canada.)

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