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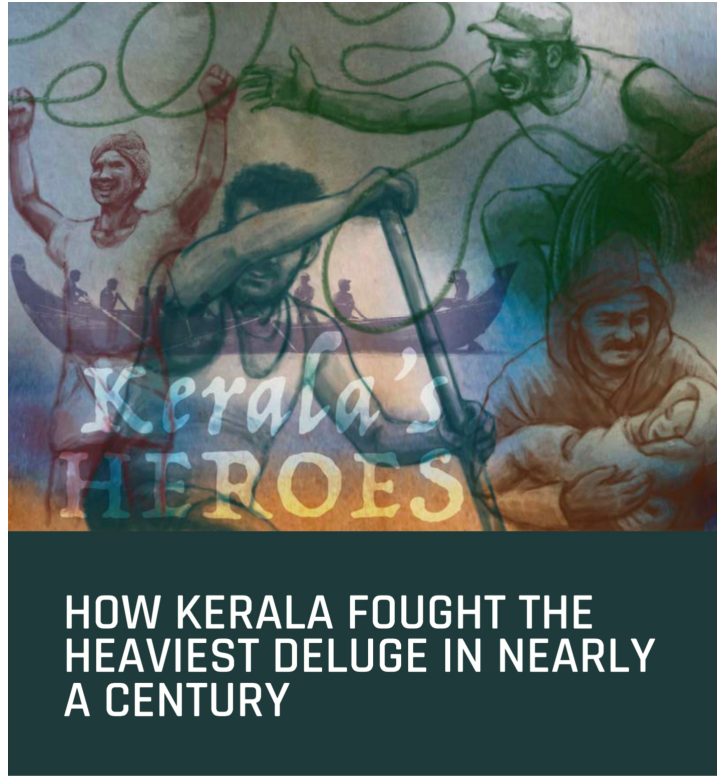
European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

12.10.2018

Vijay Prashad
20.11.2018

**TOMORROW WILL BE TOO LATE TO DO WHAT
WE SHOULD HAVE DONE A LONG TIME AGO:
THE THIRTY-THIRD NEWSLETTER (2018).**



Tricontinental Dossier no. 9
October 2018

In 1992, Fidel Castro of Cuba went to Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to announce, ‘Tomorrow will be too late to do what we should have done a long time ago’. He meant take precautions against the detritus of carbon-driven capitalism and move towards an ecological socialist system. The committee to govern the world – as the Group of 7 likes to see itself – went home and disregarded the Rio protocols. Cuba had other ideas.

Four years before the Rio conference, the UN’s World Meteorological Organisation and the UN Environment Programme set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). There was worry that environmental destruction was not only injurious to the planet and its people, but that it had hastened the demise of the possibility of life on earth. The IPCC had a very straightforward mandate – to study the risk of human-induced climate change, to assess its potential impacts and to offer possible options for prevention. The IPCC, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for warning about the catastrophic implications of carbon-induced capitalism, produced five major assessment reports and a number of special reports.

This past week, the IPCC released a special [report](#), *Global Warming of 1.5°C*. This report says that it ‘would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society’. If the current path of carbon abuse remains unaltered, then warming will not be contained below 1.5°C. As global warming increases beyond 1.5°C, coral reefs will vanish, and the sea levels will rise. Arid regions like Africa’s Sahel will completely dry up. Drought and famine will become more common and entire ecosystems will die. ‘Rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes’ – sounds like the IPCC, in its careful way, is telling the world that the capitalist system is simply not capable of dealing with the calamity of global warming.

In an important [article](#) in the *Review of Agrarian Studies* (2015), Tejal Kanitkar of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences writes that the total carbon budget available to the planet to limit global warming to 1.5°C is 744 GtC (gigatons of carbon). The carbon budget is the estimate of the amount of carbon dioxide that can be emitted to keep global temperature rise above pre-industrial levels to below a set amount (the set amount oscillates between 1.5°C and 2°C). What remained of this budget – in 2015 – was 77 GtC. Most of the use of that carbon space was taken by the advanced industrial countries, with the developing world only using a fraction of the carbon budget. There is no serious discussion now about how – with the need for severe curbs on carbon use – the advanced industrial states will maintain their immense drain on the carbon space at the same time as the Global South

will be able to meet the expectations of their populations. Inequitable burden sharing appears to be the way ahead unless the countries of the Global South are able to exert power against the advanced industrial states and prevent them from setting an unfair agenda.

Seriousness in the committee to govern the world can be gauged by Trump's comment about this IPCC report – 'I want to look at who drew it'.



Panmao Zhai, the Secretary General of the Chinese Meteorological Society and the co-chair of the IPCC Working Group 1, said that 'we are already seeing the consequences of 1°C of global warming through more extreme weather, rising sea-levels and diminishing Arctic sea ice'. One of these impacts is the ferocity of hurricanes (as [shown](#) by the 2007 IPCC report). The most recent example is Hurricane Michael, which has just barreled through the Caribbean and struck the US coastline with great ferocity. Last year, two major hurricanes swept through the Caribbean – Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. They devastated the island nations from Dominica to Cuba. But, the relief, rehabilitation and recovery in these islands was not identical. In Puerto Rico – as the Canadian journalist Naomi Klein shows in a new book, *The Battle for Paradise* – the United States government neither prepared for the hurricanes nor did it assist the people afterwards. There was more interest in privatization of the electricity grid than in repairing it in the months afterwards. Klein calls this 'disaster capitalism', how profit-making sets up disasters and then uses disasters to make money (you can read my review of Naomi's book [here](#)).

But, in Cuba, not far from Puerto Rico and as badly hit by the hurricanes, the preparation was much more sophisticated and the recovery – despite the lack of finances – much swifter. We could call this 'disaster socialism' – the manner in which a socialist society

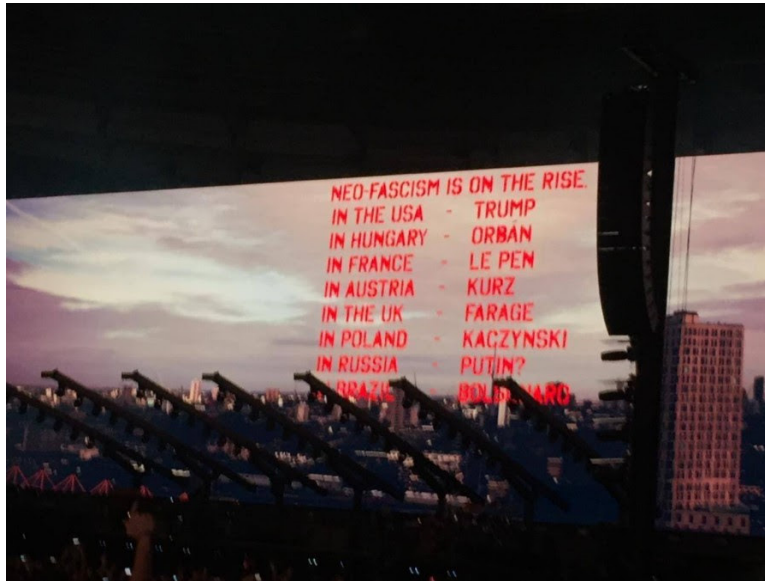
tackles climate change's extreme events. When Castro came back to Havana from Rio in 1992, he returned to a society that had already – since 1980 – been seized of the importance of agro-ecology and environmentalism. After Rio, Cuba went on a tear despite the loss of its Soviet partner and the embargo by the United States. The use of biopesticides and the protection of wetlands came alongside the decentralization of the electricity grid. Volunteerism is part of the fabric of Cuban society, an ethic that was essential in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The spirit of volunteerism was such that Cuba sent hundreds of doctors to assist other Caribbean islands (Cuba also offered to send doctors and electrical workers to Puerto Rico, an offer rebuffed by Washington). After the hurricane, I [reported](#) for *Frontline* on the tale of two islands, how socialist Cuba had so effectively planned for the hurricanes and for recovery, while the capitalist United States spluttered. Much is to be learned from these two experiences. It is one thing to have the flashiest shops. It is another to have a society that is not alienated from nature and that does not disregard people.

Last year, Cuba announced the new policy of [Tarea Vida](#) (Protect Life), a programme of its Council of Ministers to 'increase the resilience of vulnerable communities', [said](#) Dalia Salabarría Fernández (a marine biologist at the National Centre for Protected Areas). Rising sea levels and deterioration of coral reefs are a serious problem which Tarea Vida proposes to tackle. As the capitalist bloc continues to poison the world with toxins, in socialist Cuba mitigation is already at hand.



This summer, rain fell at unimaginable rates over Kerala – creating floods that are part of the cycle of extreme weather due to carbon-driven capitalism. The Left Democratic Front government in the state had prepared for the rising waters and it went into action. And so did Kerala’s society, where – thanks to a century of social struggle – the people are organised into various cooperatives and unions which worked to save the lives of people and animals and to offer shelter to large numbers of people (see this [story](#) by **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** Senior Fellow P. Sainath). Strong public action by the state and by society in Kerala mirrors strong public action in Cuba. Our **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** team in Delhi has written the story of the Kerala floods and the public action that characterises the disaster. Our [Dossier no. 9](#) (*How Kerala Fought the Heaviest Deluge in Nearly a Century*) describes the severity of the storm, the destruction caused by the flood and then, mainly, on the work done by the people and their government to save lives and rebuild villages and towns. It is a powerful story, an inspirational story to be sure, but also a story that teaches us how a government of the left can take measure now to mitigate the dangers of climate change. Governments of the left, as economist VK Ramachandran (vice chair of the Kerala State Planning Board) recently [said](#), have to see that ‘climate resilience is a very important part of resource planning’. This is what Cuba’s Tarea Vida is all about and this is what we need to seriously focus upon. The cover of our dossier has an original drawing by the brilliant artist Orijit Sen (I have used it as the main image for this newsletter – above).

Our **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research** image of the week is of the Communist leader in Kerala AK Gopalan (see below). It was people like AKG who worked in Kerala to create a society of cooperatives and voluntary associations as well as of a state government given to the people; it was this society and state that sanctified public action. Worth noting that it was AKG that spearheaded the creation of the workers cooperatives to make and sell coffee – the Indian Coffee Workers Cooperative Society that runs the Indian Coffee House, available across India (my favourite is in Kolkata, off College Street).



The picture above is [from](#) a concert by Pink Floyd's Roger Waters in São Paulo (Brazil). It was after the first round of the elections, where the far right's candidate Jair Bolsonaro came close to an outright victory. In the second round, on 28 October, he will be challenged by the candidate of the Workers' Party – Fernando Haddad. It is hoped that Haddad will be able to galvanise the outrage against Bolsonaro's fascism. Brazil's corporate media – if it can be given that name – stands with Bolsonaro, who is backed by a bourgeoisie more worried about the dangers posed by the impoverished than by the rise of the fascists. The backdrop at Waters' show catalogued the rise of neo-fascism, from Trump down to Bolsonaro. This is the dramatis personae of our monsters (Waters neglected Duterte, Erdogan and Modi – figures in the edited book [Strongmen](#)). Trump had sneered at the IPCC report. He is not serious about climate change. But he is serious about his other small – yet dangerous – wars: his war against Iran and his war against China. On Iran, Trump and his acolytes have [said](#) that there will be 'hell to pay' if any US citizen is harmed by the Iranians in West Asia (they focus on Syria). They are looking for a reason to destroy Iran. On China, Trump continues his trade war. Now, there is a serious discussion about whether China will stop buying the debt of the United States – a policy decision that would impact every aspect of US power (please see my report on China [here](#)).

Strongmen like Trump are not interested in humans or nature. They are interested in power and money. For them, what the people in Cuba and Kerala are doing is not of interest. They are creating hell on earth – places such as the [Agbogbloshie](#) shack settlement in Accra (Ghana), where the detritus of capitalism goes to be broken down and reused. The

US poet Marge Piercy is thinking of these strongmen, when she writes – ‘How do these men stand being so cold and full of malice?’ They stand it because it benefits them. They make money off people and nature. That is the limit of their ambitions. Warmly, Vijay.

