

International Transform Conference in Copenhagen, 12 March 2016

## **“Red/Green Alternatives – Breaking with Growth and Neo-liberalism”**

### **REPORT**

#### **The morning session – introducing two speakers:**

**Richard Smith**, USA, economic historian, PhD University of California, Los Angeles.

*“Six Theses on Saving the Planet.” A transition to a largely planned, mostly publicly-owned economy based on democratic governance and rough socio-economic equality is the only alternative to market-driven planetary collapse.*

**Richard Smith** argues that we have to focus on the need for a planned economy on the basis of the ecological/climate situation. There has been a historical rise in temperature from 2012 to 2014. More and more understand that the problem is the economic system – Capitalism not climate is the problem.

The following was said in the 1950s: “Consumption is a way of life”: The logic of Capitalism is to produce products that fast go to pieces. For 300 years Capitalism has improved our lives but not now.

In US there are two approaches to desperately avoid confronting Capitalism, Richard says:

1. De-growth – the first approach, inspired by Herman Daly’s (American ecological economist): idea of a “steady state economy” and Serge Latouche’s call for “degrowth,” imagined that capitalism could be reconstructed so it would stop growing, or degrow, while continuing to develop internally. But can you imagine a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) slow down production in order to save the planet? “Steady state” and “degrowth” are incompatible with a viable capitalist economy.
2. Green Capitalism – some of this can be used. Against “green capitalism” theorists and proponents, Richard argues that companies can’t prioritize people and planet over profits because CEOs and corporate boards are not responsible to society, they’re responsible to private shareholders. Carbon emissions – no government will accept any cut in carbon emissions or have carbon taxes. No one will do a drastic cut to reduce emissions - you need to have 10%. To cut the emission 8-10 % means de-industrialization. The biggest companies would collapse with loss of jobs, crisis etc.. Carbon taxes are a waste of time.

Richard contends that there is an alternative. In his essay *“Six Theses on Saving the Planet”* he says: “...impossible as this may seem at present, only a revolutionary overthrow of the existing social order, and the institution of a global eco-socialist democracy, has a chance of preventing global ecological collapse and perhaps even our own extinction.”

Here is what we need:

- We need a democratically planned economy. Social justice. We need a 5-year plan for saving the ocean.
- We need to abolish all dispensable production. Cut automobile production. We have to replace industrialized agriculture, fishing and so on.
- We need public institutions, to do things collectively instead of individually. We need an economy that can guarantee jobs. We need green jobs, low carbon work.
- The global North must de-industrialize for people to have more sustainable lives. The global North should help the global South.

Look at China – this is the most planned capitalist economy today - but they plan very badly – what about the ecological consequences? Soviet Union also worked badly because of bad planning.

Arguments against planning are dubious. Many state-owned companies function well. Small producers are not destroying the world. But large companies - like Monsanto - are doing so. Large companies should be under social control.

Democracy: We have to make discussions democratic and transparent. We need to socialize. A society with neither rich nor poor favours no corruption.

69 % of Americans want to protect the environment – but they do not have the option.

Democracy is about social and economic equality. 80 individuals own as much as 6 billion people do – that is not democracy.

Equal societies create more health, lesser crime and so on.

We have a planet that can guarantee a good standard of living for everybody.

The promise of Eco-Socialism – the greatest challenge we ever faced is the challenge of Capitalism.

People are winning important fights e.g. Bolivia’s fight for water – all share a common hope and a dominant demand for bottom-up democracy.

**Shalmali Guttal**, India, Executive Director, Focus on the Global South, Bangkok.

*“The creative power and resistance potential of the commons”. The climate crisis demands that we radically change the way we produce, consume and live. The Commons offer us a new way to approach nature, wealth, knowledge and human capacity, that move us away from individualism, commodification and acquisition, and towards collectivities, relationships and synergies.*

**Shalmali Guttal** started with an introduction:

The climate crisis is in a sense the ultimate crisis of capitalism: there is no easy exit from this endgame; we have to change how we live, produce, consume; we can no longer try to convert limits to barriers that can be overcome through techno fixes; we cannot use modern science to recreate nature—all that has been tried (at great cost) and has failed.

Capitalism has advanced to a stage - where life itself is threatened - where life itself is a source for profit extraction.

Shalmali gave an outline of the commons:

The creative potential of commons: The commons offer us the potential for change from below. The commons can be used to undermine Capitalism.

People generally associate the term “commons” with land, forests, common pool resources and/or common property. Contemporary practice and thinking, however, show the immense

potential of the commons to resist global capitalism, and co-create just, equitable, sustainable post-extractivist social and economic systems.

Possibly, the best-known examples of commons are in nature: air, water, land, forests, and biodiversity. But commons can also be social (health, education, safety) intellectual and cultural (knowledge, technology, the internet, literature, music) and political (human rights, justice, democracy). Internet technology has enabled virtual commons.

Commons cannot be captured by individuals without being changed. They are not a utopia - they consist of people, negotiating inside and outside the common - social relationships have to be negotiated. They are not static, they are dynamic. We are all actors who can create commons. They are created by people.

In South East Asia there are not only commons among peasants, but also in urban areas, workers' unions, urban gardening. Commons have to be recognized as commons. To share responsibility.

Women use it in traditional societies. Women are creating commons to fight Patriarchy. Traditional systems are not necessarily good.

Grey areas:

Shalmali Guttal underlined that there is a danger of open access without rules (grey area). For example, seas, oceans, mountains, forests and rivers are open access and face threats of over-exploitation.

Bringing critical ecosystems under commons governance can ensure their protection and regeneration far more effectively than through state or private conservation programmes.

Public goods and services, i.e., those provided by the state, are generally not considered commons. Public water is owned by the State, not commons. But water is common. We have to find other ways to manage the collective and the private. Water, food, education and health are conditions necessary for "life and its reproduction" and by developing commons governance frameworks for them we can prevent and reverse their privatisation and commodification.

There is private ownership in commons (fisherfolk - rules on what and where to fish). We need state intervention to have rules. Farm/crop lands can be privately owned, but community members still govern grazing, forest and wetlands and water as commons.

The ultimate atmospheric commons are climate and air. "Creating an artificial community of users".

Threats to the Commons:

Commons are non-commodified systems of production and thus a direct challenge to capitalism. They create and operate within social spaces not occupied by capital.

Commons have always been terrains of struggle between different societal, political and economic actors; but in the current conjuncture of recurring crises, the commons are spaces where the fiercest and most enduring resistances to capitalist development, neoliberalism and economic growth are being waged. By capturing and co-opting the commons, their creative potential to undermine capitalism would be neutralized.

State and corporations have captured the commons and are introducing market mechanisms; e.g. via free trade and investment agreements; globalization of production and global value chains. Financial capitalism is creating new commodities as commons. Intellectual property rights are very dangerous.

Where markets do not yet exist, natural resources are being converted into commodities so they can be traded.

Conclusions:

In closing, I want to emphasize that the commons as a concept and commoning as a practice are intensely political. They are dynamic—our understanding about how they challenge capitalism and build systemic alternatives is being constantly expanded through practice, experimentation and grounded scholarship. We can transform our societies and life.

Because of their creative power and resistance potential, they are also open to ideological capture and cooptation, and are crucial terrains of struggle. It is crucial that we not only defend existing commons from enclosures and cooptation, but also, shape new commons to respond to challenges and crises.

## Seminar 1: Eco-socialist and eco-feminist perspectives

**Corinne Morel Darleux**, France, National Secretary in charge of Ecosocialism and Regional Councillor, Parti de Gauche, France.

*“Ecosocialism: a project to reconcile environment and jobs, citizens and politics”. While austerity still spreads in Europe, the last climate summit Cop21 in Paris has once again failed to meet ambitious objectives, and it becomes more and more obvious that economics, climate and social issues need a brand new approach, combining long-term and complex thinking, articulated to social movements and alternatives.”*

**Corinne Morel Darleux** characterized Eco-Socialism as a political project to reconcile economy, ecology and jobs. The Climate Summit in Paris failed to accomplish this. Economy, ecology and climate must go together.

Analyses: The politicians tend to divide jobs on one side and environment on the other side. We have to link them, they are equally important. We have to create 1 million climate jobs. TINA (“There Is No Alternative) – no, there are alternatives.

People lack consciousness – the socialist government in France has given millions to corporations, which has resulted in greater unemployment. But people start to move, there has been manifestations with half a million participants. 1 million have signed a petition, the working class, young people, students. This gives a little hope.

When we talk about the environment and climate it is disconnected from global production, global finance and public services. There is a need for a synthesis – eco-socialism: Until now you have a Marxist approach and an environmental approach. We need another approach.

For example pollution in a river: On the one hand environmentalists will remove the pollution. On the other the workers want to keep their jobs. We lack common tools. We have to draw eco-socialism from both traditions, this is important so that we can build a common language. We must have a social, economic and environmental approach.

How to finance this? To make a counter budget, tax on luxury products. Stop crazy projects as the railway between France and Italy. It is possible to find money to finance a new approach. The program is close to what Richard Smith said – rational planning of environment, job creation in the environmental sector, jobs in energy. 1 million jobs can be created in 15 years.

It is important to discuss and think about this outside the working place. As eco-socialists we have to have solutions because we have to pay the rent and so on.

**Ariel Salleh**, Australia, Associate Professor, University of Western Sydney, social ecologist, ecofeminist.

*“Ecofeminism – listening to the deepest eco-socialist voice”. The word “ecofeminism” might be new, but the pulse behind it has always driven women’s efforts to save their livelihood and make their communities safe. Ecological feminists are both street fighters and philosophers.*

**Ariel Salleh** says that: “Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is both a grassroots counter-globalisation movement and form of ideology critique drawing on women’s historical positioning as socially reproductive labour.”

Her understanding of Ecofeminism covers women, workers, indigenous people, and environments.

Ecofeminism started as a practical movement in the 70s with women 'for life on earth' opposing nuclear weapons and is not about some innate essentialist feminine nature or goddess worship.

Since the beginning Ecofeminists have resisted globalization.

In 2001 the first eco-socialist manifesto was formulated by the Capitalism Nature Socialism journal in the US and revised in France around 2005 but feminist points were not included. Ecofeminist politics is a critique of the capitalist patriarchal commodification of women and the parallel treatment of nature.

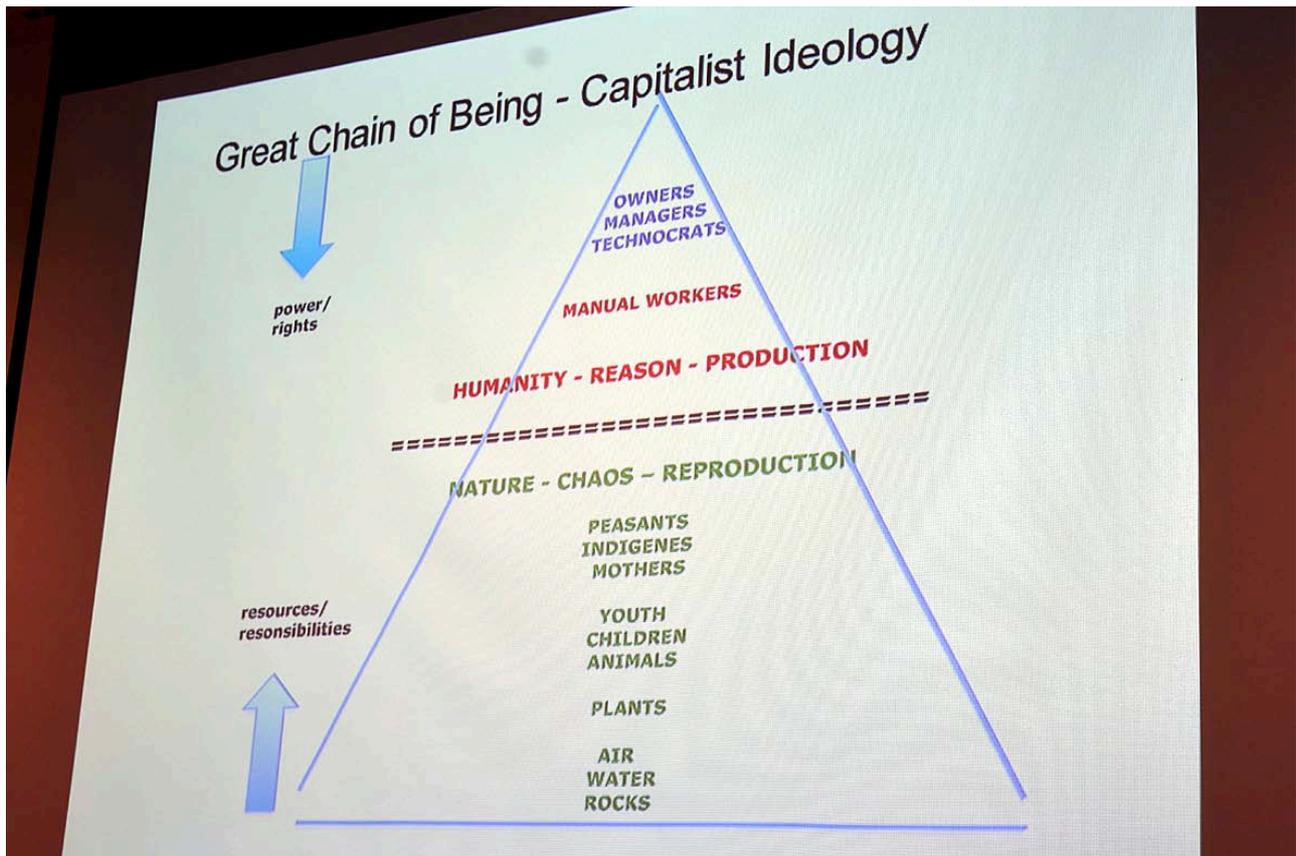
Patriarchal institutions control and exploit women’s bodies as natural resources.

The great chain of being [diagram below] shows how capitalism is embedded in traditional patriarchal thinking.

Ecofeminists from both global North and South see class, race, gender, and species domination and exploitation facilitated by ideological dualisms with the first term valued and privileged over the second:

self	/	other
man	/	woman
white	/	black
capital	/	labour
humans	/	nature
mind	/	body
clean	/	dirty
North	/	South
1	/	0

These metaphors structure everyday life assumptions and are sustained by religion, philosophy, law, economics, and science, so enabling the instrumental manipulation of non-valued 'others'. The one-zero code is embedded in all kinds of science.



Capitalism goes back only 300 years, whereas patriarchy is more than 10.000 years old, for this reason Ecofeminist analyses cut beneath other political lines.

Ecofeminism is not a rejection of Marxist thinking, but a deepening of it.

Women also critique masculinist thinking in ecological economics and other disciplines.

But today feminism is being 'individualized' by neoliberal postmodern tendencies.

By contrast, Ecofeminists advocate a subsistence perspective with local eco-sufficient communities.

Neither Marxist exchange value nor use value can represent the metabolic value of living nature.

## Seminar 2: Breaking with current policies and developments

**Haris Golemis**, Greece, Director of Nicos Poulantzas Institute, economist.

***“The Radical Left in Government: A Necessary but not Sufficient Condition for Breaking with Neoliberalism”.** The hope that the rise of SYRIZA to power, in January 2015, would be a first step towards breaking with neoliberalism in Greece and the EU did not finally come true. Seven months later, a third Memorandum of austerity was imposed on this small country of the European periphery. Following this unhappy development, but also the aggressive expansion of austeritarian politics throughout Europe, there is an urgent need for the European radical Left to rethink its strategy and tactics at both national and European level.*

**Haris Golemis** argued that neoliberal management of capitalism did not only step back after the 2008 systemic crisis, but became even more aggressive and authoritarian, with almost all governments in the world as well as international organizations repeating, without any shame, the old Thatcher’s slogan “There Is No Alternative” (TINA). This development is an exemption in the history of world capitalism, since in the past major systemic crises created attempts for solutions, e.g. the deflationary crisis of the 1930s led to Keynesianism, while neoliberalism appeared as the solution to the stagflation of the 1970s.

This historical “paradox” is more apparent in the European Union. Here a harsh neo-liberal “structural adjustment programme” was agreed between the Troika (EU, ECB, IMF) and the governments of the countries most severely hit by a “sovereign debt crisis” by the end of 2009. These programmes imposed strict austerity (big wage and pensions cuts), extensive privatizations of public assets and services, land expropriation and an increase in labour flexibility mainly through the abolition of collective agreements.

Deviation from neoliberal rule in the EU – already guaranteed by the architecture of all European Treaties after Maastricht – was minimized not only in the countries under Memoranda, but in all member states of the EU, and especially of the Eurozone, through specific institutional changes of the so called “Economic Governance” (Six Pack, Fiscal Compact, Two Pack, Competitiveness Pact, European Semester).

When trying to evaluate and get the necessary lessons from the actions and policies of SYRIZA in different periods, one cannot ignore this new regime of “authoritarian capitalism” prevailing in the “actually existing” EU. Despite the disastrous effects of austerity policies, resistances from the part of trade unions and social movements were rather limited in most European countries, including those under Memoranda, with the exception mainly of Greece and of Spain.

In Greece, for at least two years (2010-2012), due mainly to the deep recession (Greek GDP reduced by 25% between 2008 and 2014), a new social alliance was formed which included jobless (unemployment rate was 26% in 2014), workers of the public and private sector, pensioners, professionals, owners of small private enterprises, peasants and the youth. Due to this social alliance and the collapse of the traditional parties of the political system, which implemented two disastrous austerity programmes, Greece experienced an explosive situation. According to some analysts, soon after 2010, the dominant cleavage in the Greek society and political system was between memorandum and anti-memorandum, the second camp fortunately dominated by SYRIZA and not the extreme right of Golden Dawn. After 2012, a change took place in the expectations of big segments of the Greek population. It was realized that what was needed in order to break with neoliberalism was a fundamental

political change in which SYRIZA – a small, until then, party of the radical Left – would have a protagonistic role.

SYRIZA won the January 2015 elections with the promise to implement a rather mild anti-austerity programme and at the same time to negotiate with the Troika a generous reduction of the country's non-sustainable public debt. Its election slogan in January 2015 was "Hope is on the way – Greece goes forward – Europe is Changing". The leadership of SYRIZA and the majority of party cadres, members and supporters believed that its win in the elections and the formation of a government of the Left would not only stop human catastrophe in Greece, but would also be a catalyst for an anti-neoliberal change in the EU. This view was shared by many parties of the radical Left, Green parties, considerable sections of social democracy and social movements, not only in Europe but throughout the world. After six months of negotiations, the Tsipras government finally surrendered and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July a new agreement – the 3<sup>rd</sup> Memorandum – was signed, although a week before – on July 5 – an equally harsh programme submitted as an ultimatum to the government was rejected by the Greek people in a referendum with a resounding 62% of the vote. The Greek government bent under the threat of Grexit and economic meltdown. Since then and until now, the second Tsipras' government rules the country under the strict constraints of a new austerity programme.

Even in its defeat, SYRIZA influenced the views of the radical left in Europe. It brought to surface strategic and tactical differences among the different currents of the Left. "Strategic defeat" or "tactical retreat" were two politically correct expressions used in the passionate discussions fuelled by the final outcome of the negotiations (but there were also insults). In hindsight, Haris Golemis sees the promise of the first Tsipras' government to implement a non-austerity programme within the Euro zone, as almost a "mission impossible". Also expectations from SYRIZA coming from a broad progressive spectrum outside Greece were excessive. SYRIZA believed that existing differences among Troika members would give to its government room for maneuver and maybe a compromise. This assumption proved wrong, since all big actors (European Commission, ECB, IMF and of course the German and other EU governments) shared the view that a possible success of the SYRIZA experiment could not only put in danger the EU neoliberal construct, but would also dispute the dogma of TINA as the single way out of the debt crisis, which would give a "dangerous sign" to the dominated classes in all European countries.

It should have been obvious from the outset that the undertaking of government responsibilities in a small country of the Euro zone and the EU by a party of the radical Left, although necessary to start a fight against neoliberalism, is certainly not sufficient for breaking with it. Within the present Eurozone and EU, the radical Left cannot break with neoliberalism by simply taking government power. Following this conclusion, there are different positions on the left: The one side supports the view that the only way for breaking with neoliberalism in a European country is the exit from the Eurozone and/or the EU. The view of the other side, which includes the present SYRIZA but also of most of the radical parties which are members of the EL, is that in today's financialized capitalism breaking with neoliberalism in one country, either inside or outside the Eurozone and the EU, is not possible-especially if that country is of a small and medium size- unless radicalism contaminates also other countries.

There are two inherent dangers regarding the two radical left camps:

- To end up in sectarianism and isolationism
- To slide into ideological mutation and be integrated into the system

Despite strategic differences both camps on the left must not stop communicating among themselves, trying at the same time to coordinate their struggle against neoliberalism, despite their strategic differences. Trade unions, social movements and various ad hoc initiatives at the European level can play a very constructive role in this process of “rapprochement”.

**Asbjørn Wahl**, Norway, Campaign for the Welfare State, Chair of the Working Group on Climate Change in the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), researcher and author.

*“The current crises as an opportunity for social transformation”. We are faced with a multiplicity of crises with many of the same root causes. This gives us an opportunity to build broad coalitions of resistance. It is an interest-based struggle, and the balance of power has to be shifted considerably. Alternatives have to be more than wishful thinking, and it is as much about agency as policy. We have to overcome the political and ideological crisis on the left.*

**Asbjørn Wahl** said that there is a new discussion in this seminar of how to reach the goals talked about in the morning. His talk was based on power-points.

He mentioned the following key points to discuss:

1. The multiplicity of crises
2. Clear understanding of the economic crisis
3. Key question: The character of the real existing EU
4. The political and ideological crisis in the trade union and labour movement - and the left
5. Points on the Greek defeat
6. Elements towards an alternative

Asbjørn had some comments on these:

Re 1: There is a class struggle going on. We need broad coalitions.

Re 2: The internal contradictions in Capitalism led to the crisis - a systemic crisis.

Neo-liberal ideology was not challenged by the resistance of labour.

Austerity is part of the class war.

Re 3: Can the EU be changed from within by democratic means?

Many barriers to create a simultaneous movement:

- Democratic deficit
- Neo-liberalism both constitutional and institutional system in the EU
- The legislative system is almost irreversible
- The Euro as an economic straightjacket
- Lack of simultaneousness in decision-making
- Expanded role of the EJJ (EU Court of Justice)

Re 4: Trade unions still believe in the social partnership ideology. They underestimated the strength of Capitalism. Lots of illusions about the EU.

Re 5: The balance of power was unfavourable, but his is not an excuse for everything. Why did the left government not resign after surrender and mobilize from below?

Re 6: Opportunities to build resistance:

- Build power and mobilize from below
- Unify anti-austerity and climate struggle
- To go beyond Keynesianism
- To learn from left in government

**Nancy Holmstrom**, USA, Rutgers University, Newark, Department of Philosophy.

***“Promising signs of radical change in consciousness – to reverse the prioritization of private property over collective”.*** *The dominant individualist conception of rationality and the prioritization of private property over collective must be reversed. There are some promising signs of a radical change in consciousness.*

**Nancy Holmstrom** stated that she had to begin on a very pessimistic note: “Because never in my lifetime - indeed, I think, in history - has there been such a gap between what is necessary for the sake of humanity and the forces, movements ready to bring that into being.”

The ecological issue, she said, is probably exposing the issue in a clearer way - the need to break with Capitalism.

The left has been slow to give the ecological crisis the centrality it should have in all our practice, she said. But more and more the left is coming to understand that the ecological crisis includes all of these issues, that poor people around the globe and in each society, particularly women and people of colour, are the worst victims of both the economic and ecological crises, which inevitably lead to wars.

She said that she wanted also to challenge two dominant notions that underlie our current system and ways of thinking about it: the first regarding property and the second regarding rationality. In both cases, the individual is prioritized over the collective. She argued that they should be reversed.

She mentioned “the commons” and the line between the public and the private good.

She also addressed the other core concept of Rationality:

“Given the importance of public goods – sometimes life and death importance – it would seem the most rational thing in the world to work together to achieve them. Yet paradoxically, the conception of rational motivation dominant in economics, especially in the US, entails that this is not so. According to this view, (called Individual Utility Maximization or IUM), when an individual’s behaviour is rational, she aims to maximize her own utility, *whatever* that might be.”

What is rational from an alternative point of view?

Some promising signs of changed consciousness in the United States:

The Bernie Sanders campaign. Surveys show that 39-56% of Democrats call themselves socialists.

In 2011: a survey showed that 49% of people under 30 had a favourable view of socialism, vs 47% of Capitalism.

What exactly “socialism” means to the respondents is not clear, Nancy explained. “For Sanders, it is an expanded New Deal or welfare state capitalism of the kind that is under attack and shrinking around the world, including Denmark.” But she did not think it realistic to get this back.

Recently a poll showed that 1/6 of Americans would be willing to break the law to protest something damaging to the environment.

Whatever exactly the polls regarding socialism signify positively, it is clear what they signify negatively – that is, a deep disillusionment with capitalism and the so-called democracy that goes with it.

Especially support among the young is heartening. There is a deep alienation of the young of the system. Indeed there is a deep alienation of the US population from the political and economic status quo. So there is potential here. The challenge for the Left is how to develop this dissatisfaction into a broad, anti-capitalist and truly inclusive eco-socialist movement.

**Written speeches from the conference, see: <http://www.transformdanmark.dk>**

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*Transform!Danmark*

*9.6.2016*