**We only want Earth**

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“Our demands most moderate are: we only want the earth”. These are the words of James Connolly, an Irish revolutionary who took part in the Easter Rising of 1916. Connolly was fighting against British colonial oppression in Ireland but his fight was for more than that. His fight was against all forms of oppression. Connolly understood that Ireland had first to rid itself of the British before it could deal with all other injustices, especially those caused by capitalism. According to him, “the day has passed for patching up the capitalist system; it must go”. What Connolly wanted was to win. He knew that fighting to win was what was important. He also knew that reforms or ‘patching up’ were not good enough.

Over a hundred years after Connolly’s execution, capitalism still dominates. If anything, it’s more deep-rooted and more injurious particularly because of neoliberal policies which have resulted in unprecedented levels of income and wealth inequalities and environmental devastation. And even worse, neoliberalism brought with it the ‘end of history’ and a pervasive new message that ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA). So, despite its imperfections, capitalism is the best system there is for achieving prosperity and personal freedom. That message is so engrained that many on the Left find it hard to defeat. Not believing we can win, not believing there is an alternative is the biggest obstacle we face. What are the ramifications of this propaganda?

To answer that, let’s first talk about Rocky. The first Rocky film introduces us to Rocky Balboa, the quintessential outsider and underdog who takes on the might of world heavyweight champion Apollo Creed. Rocky trains his socks off in preparation for the big fight, and on the night, he scraps his way through fifteen rounds and remains standing. He loses by judges’ decision. But that’s okay. We didn’t really believe he was going to win anyway, and despite losing, Rocky achieves a personal victory because he fought so gallantly against such a mighty enemy. And so, the final credits roll up in a triumphant, upbeat note. And gone are the 70s downbeat endings.

That’s how it is for many of us when it comes to thinking about change. It’s as though we know the system is too powerful, too big, too entrenched, and worst of all, it’s the only one that really, truly works, so fighting it isn’t about winning because we accept we can’t. Instead, it’s about going the distance and staying on our feet no matter what kind of pounding we get, and ultimately, fighting the good fight.

This state of not believing we can win encourages all sorts of perverse behaviours. Instead of collaborating with each other, we compete for scarce resources, duplicate effort and working at cross-purposes. Instead of aiming for radical change, we stop short at modest reforms or narrow agendas and fool ourselves into thinking that the system isn’t all bad and can be improved upon if only this or that reform is made.

The psychological block of there being no alternative is made worse by the ecological crisis. We’re not just fighting for justice and equality any longer. We’re fighting for survival too. If we had an impossible struggle before, we have an insanely impossible one now.

How do we overcome this immutable barrier? How do we protect our natural world and transition to net-zero carbon, and at the same time, transition to a more just post-capitalist society?

The starting point is vision. Vision followed by strategy. Vision helps us identify our destination, that place we want to be after capitalism. Strategy gives us a roadmap for getting there. And recognising the urgency of the ecological crisis, acting immediately to address that must be the initial steps in our strategy.

If there was ever a time to set out vision and strategy, it is now. Two years of a global pandemic have exposed the weaknesses and injustices in our systems. The wealthiest have exploited the unusual circumstances, getting richer off increased demand for PPE equipment, vaccinations and online shopping; while ordinary people have lost their jobs, seen their businesses close or have been forced to work in unsafe conditions; and while health systems have been brought to near breaking point and vaccines denied to millions in the Global South. And now the push is on to end the pandemic (whether Coronavirus is still a threat or not) and force us back to living life the way it was before 2020.

But the pandemic has also caused many to consider that there might be a different way of doing things. We may be getting bombarded with media messages that we all must get back to ‘normal’, but plenty of us are saying no. After what we’ve been through, we deserve better than ‘normal’. If the pandemic is ending, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the best we can expect is to return to the way things were.

All through 2021, there have been workers’ strikes across the globe demanding better pay and conditions, from the US to India, from Peru to France, from Malaysia to South Africa; from nurses to factory workers, from delivery drivers to teachers, from miners to dockers, from carers to food servers, from musicians to carpenters. These strikes are making an impact with some seeing their demands met. And others from the working population, after tasting the autonomy possible with working from home, have decided they want to continue doing so or they want to do something altogether different with their lives but until now never had the courage.

This is a glimmer of change; change that isn’t just about reforming the system. For as Connolly warned, we must avoid the pitfall of implementing reforms. Reforms are changes that may make small improvements but they in no way challenge the status quo. Reforms implicitly accept that the ‘system’ (capitalism and neoliberalism) is immutable and can’t be changed. Reforms are the perfect way for the system to remain as is by granting small concessions that make people believe they’re getting something different.

Instead, the glimmer of change emerging from the pandemic has the potential to take the system apart through non-reformist reforms, i.e. those changes that improve lives now and at the same time expose the weaknesses in capitalism and build the capacity for further change.

Excerpted: ‘We Only Want the Earth’.

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