

We Only Have One Planet—Defending It Will Require Collective Measures

João Pedro Stedile

The Brazilian people and Latin Americans more generally are already suffering serious consequences from climate change and environmental crimes. The current destructive dimension of capitalism leads to far-reaching consequences. Millions of hectares of the Amazon and other biomes have experienced deforestation, been burned, and converted into agribusiness land every year. Agribusiness releases millions of litres of pesticides into the environment annually, poisoning the soil, water, and human beings. Mining is taking over vast territories, overexploiting mineral assets, with immense repercussions, including dam failures and contamination by heavy metals.

Climate change is already a reality. It has altered the conditions of food production across our continent. There are long periods of drought, as well as shorter periods without rain at decisive moments for what has been planted. Rain is concentrated and often associated with frosts and windstorms that destroy many crops. In cities, droughts turn into a water crisis and concentrated rains lead to deaths and the destruction of homes and infrastructure, always disproportionately impacting the working class. Many popular and environmental leaders who defend their territories from this dynamic of exploitation are murdered. In short, we are living through a chaotic period, with worsening environmental living conditions.



Activists, Indigenous people and youth from Fridays for Future Belém (Brazil) protest against the fires in the Amazon, Pantanal and the Cerrado as part of the global climate strike day of Action. Credit: 350.org.

Root Causes

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financialised capital hegemony—large companies and speculative capital rush to privately appropriate the communal gifts of nature. This offensive by capital involves the appropriation of many natural assets, such as public lands, forests, water, biodiversity, minerals, and energy sources (hydroelectric, solar, and wind), with which the ruling classes protect their capital and transform fictitious capital into assets. Furthermore, through the intensive use of technological innovations, gifts of nature that have no

value (because they are not the fruits of human labor) are being transformed into goods for sale at a much higher price than their real value (the labor time needed to transform them into commodities and transport them onto the market), resulting in a fantastic rate of profit that could not be reached in a factory or business alone. For example, Coca-Cola and Nestlé make a rate of profit of 400 percent a year from expropriating water sources. Farmers who clear the forest and resell their land to agribusiness that produces soy or cattle make a 500 percent rate of profit. The rate of profit of companies mining gold, iron, and bauxite is over 700 percent.

This offensive on the part of large companies and banks has entailed immense environmental crimes, destruction of the environment, and changes in the climate and the availability of water.

There is also the issue of the consumption patterns imposed by capitalism, shaped by advertising, prices, and ways of life that exponentially increase the negative effects on the environment. Energy under capitalism is based in fossil fuels such as coal and oil. Petroleum is used most of all, as it is the basis of the capitalist model of urban transportation structured around individual gasoline-powered vehicles. This model causes enormous damage to the environment, air pollution, and many deaths, including thousands from lung and heart diseases.

The construction of large hydroelectric plants, forming huge artificial lakes, damages biodiversity, affects all of the local environment, and contributes to imbalances in nature and the ways of life of Indigenous people and communities across vast territories.

This can already be seen in large wind and solar energy projects defended as clean energy. These wind and solar parks were introduced by large companies in extensive areas of land, and have caused enormous damage to animals and nearby populations. Here in Brazil, peasants have already mobilised against their expansion.

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The root cause of environmental problems and crimes is thus big capital's endless pursuit of maximum profit. All these mining and energy projects are financed by major banks locally and internationally.

The Agribusiness Model

Agribusiness is a model of agricultural production implemented by big business that brings together landowners and the transnational companies and banks that finance them. From the point of view of production, it is characterised by large areas of monoculture specialising in a single product and the intensive use of transgenic seeds, heavy machinery, pesticides, and chemical fertilisers.

This production model directly affects the environment, destroying biodiversity. Pesticides (really biocides, as Rachel Carson insisted) kill all living beings in nature except the commodities in production, be it soy, cotton, corn, or livestock pasture. They also contaminate subsoil water, kill soil fertility, and even affect the atmosphere by becoming attached to water vapor, which rises to the clouds and then comes back in the form of rain over the entire population, including cities.

Agricultural products produced under the agribusiness model are highly contaminated by pesticides, especially glyphosate, which are proven to cause cancer and other diseases. All these pesticides are produced by European and U.S. companies such as Bayer, BASF, Dupont, and Syngenta, despite many of these products being banned in the United States and European Union due to their proven health toxicity.

Research has revealed that, in Brazil, 67 percent of the water supplied by public utilities in the cities is contaminated

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with glyphosate, and in 25 percent of municipalities the water supply has up to twenty-seven active ingredients of pesticides—a true chemical cocktail. In other words, every day, every hour, the urban population that consumes tap water is being

contaminated.

In a fantastic victory, forty-two thousand farmers in the United States who used glyphosate in their crops and were affected by diseases were able to prove intoxication in court, leading to the conviction of Bayer/Monsanto and a compensation of more than \$9 billion.

The monoculture of industrial trees such as eucalyptus for cellulose also destroys all plant and animal biodiversity. In these areas, nothing else survives. Everything is designed to make a maximum profit on the pulp exported to Europe and China.

The kind of cattle ranching developed as part of the agribusiness model is also responsible for the destruction of the environment, such as through the monoculture of pastures in large areas and the pollution caused by the feces of confined animals, which produce gases toxic for nature and the atmosphere. The production of confined animals also consumes a high volume of water: fifteen thousand litres per kilogram of beef. Brazil is the largest beef exporter in the world, and it comes at an irreparable environmental cost.

Agribusiness is an antisocial model, because it does not generate employment. On the contrary, each year it is responsible for putting more and more people out of work, as living labor is replaced with new technologies, such as pesticides and new machines. Therefore, agribusiness generates wealth with high labor productivity, but concentrates

this wealth in the hands of landowners and transnational companies. The regions dominated by agribusiness are the ones with the worst human development indexes in Brazil.

The agribusiness model is incompatible with nature and biodiversity, and is co-responsible for climate change and environmental crimes worldwide.

The Amazon

As a biome, the Amazon is present in eight South American countries. In Brazil, it makes up 40 percent of the entire

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country. The Amazon biome is responsible for the rainfall cycle—that is, any change in the biome is felt across the country, such as through clouds containing smoke particles from the Amazon fires that reached São Paulo in 2020. It supplies water to the ocean and to all sources of hydroelectric energy and drinking water for the population.

Unfortunately, the Amazon is suffering all the aggressions of capital. It is there that they are removing wood, deforesting, and burning forests. It is there that the agricultural frontier of expansion for agribusiness of soy, cotton, and, above all, cattle ranching—the products of which are destined for export—grows. It is a web in which all countries that buy Brazilian soybeans, beef, wood, and cotton collude.

The largest iron ore mine on the planet is located in the Amazon, exported by the company VALE, without any benefit to the local population. Since the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government (through the Kandir Law of 1995), there is even tax exemption for all exports of mineral and agricultural commodities.

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About twenty thousand prospectors financed by exporting companies are operating in Indigenous areas of the Amazon, protected by Jair Bolsonaro's neofascist government. They mine gold and use mercury, contaminating waters and rivers, killing Indigenous peoples and animals (particularly fish), and leaving large territories without life.

This entire process is illegal, but is protected by authorities and ignored by the judiciary.

The Amazon is the most sensitive ecosystem and one of the most important biomes in South America. All the measures needed to defend nature and the environment have to begin with the protection of the Amazon.

Proposals from the Landless Workers' Movement

We only have one planet and defending it will require collective measures. International governance spaces, such as the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization, climate change conferences, and biodiversity committees have proven to be incompetent and insufficient. Most of them work only in the interests of capital and not of humanity.

We must implement methods of popular democracy and broad popular participation in each country to ensure that national states work in favor of the people, not capital. We urgently need to develop new international instruments of

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governance, not just for governments, but also including representatives of political and popular organisations in every region. Societies can no longer be represented by governments, most of which were illegitimately elected or act in an authoritarian manner.

The world needs urgent measures, and governments do not want to take them. We know that it will require effort from all of humanity and, above all, engagement with and the mediation of popular organisations committed to the people. The Landless Workers' Movement has many proposals for measures that we need to start taking soon, even if their results are delayed. We propose:

- 1) Reorganising the world agriculture system in order to produce healthy foods through agroecology and balance with nature.
- 2) Developing a mass program to plant native and fruit trees in all countries, especially in cities.
- 3) Protecting water and its sources.
- 4) Combating the current energy matrix based on oil and coal, and immediately initiating the transition to a model based on clean and renewable energies under collective management.
- 5) Carrying out a broad program of land distribution to all landless peasants around the world, as a way of strengthening agriculture with family work and in harmony with nature.
- 6) Banning the use of all pesticides worldwide.
- 7) Banning predatory mining and nationalising mineral extraction under collective control.
- 8) Prioritising public and collective transport systems in all cities and using renewable energy.
- 9) Fostering the creation of urban gardens and planting fruit trees in cities as a way of building food sovereignty.
- 10) Reducing the production of beef and replacing it with other sources of protein in human diets.
- 11) Raising taxes on world agricultural trade and on the profits of large transnational companies operating in agriculture.
- 12) Banning deforestation for commercial purposes in all native forests.
- 13) Implementing programs to preserve and store water in arid regions.
- 14) Avoiding long-distance transport of food and strengthening food production at the local level.
- 15) Raising the tax rates for all ultra-processed food products.
- 16) Prohibiting the use of transgenic seeds and preventing the monopoly of ownership and production of any seed in the world.

We know that, in addition to these listed measures, structural changes that prevent further damage to nature, climate

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change, and global warming will only be possible when we overcome the drive for profit that fuels greed over nature's gifts. In other words, there can be no private property over the gifts of nature. We cannot continue to treat food and basic energy sources for the population as commodities, but rather as rights

of the people.

For this to happen, we need to envision a post-capitalist model of production. Capitalism does not represent a solution or progress for humanity, on the contrary, it is the source of all environmental and social problems, because profit and accumulation are incompatible with social equality.

The Global Left

The political organisations and theoretical thinking of the left all over the world are, in a general sense, indebted to our people. It is necessary for the left to carry out urgent self-criticism and incorporate these issues and ideas into its programs and debates. Unfortunately, there are few organic leftist intellectuals around the world debating these issues. Above all, we need to contribute to organising the working class, peasants, young people, women, students, religious people—in short, all working people—to carry out great mass mobilisations and fight in defence of our lives, the life of the planet, and the well-being of humanity.

Time is short. Without mass struggle, there will be no change.

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❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review in June 2022.

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