

UN summit subordinates environment and development to corporate interests

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The United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development came to an end on September 4. After much haggling, the nearly 200 countries represented reached a non-binding agreement that calls in vague terms for an improvement in human and environmental health and sustainability. The summit also sanctioned numerous partnerships between governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for specific actions related to the conference's stated aims.

Presidents, prime ministers and monarchs from over 100 countries attended the final days of the conference, which was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. In addition, participants included representatives of NGOs, scientists and academics, and hundreds of corporate leaders. All told, the 10-day conference attracted some 65,000 delegates, making it the largest international meeting ever held.

What above all distinguished the Johannesburg conference was the overriding influence of the giant multinational corporations that flocked to South Africa. An estimated 700 companies were represented, including many—such as those involved in oil and mining—that are deeply implicated in creating the problems the conference was supposed to address. Corporate giants such as DaimlerChrysler and Hewlett Packard, the American information technology conglomerate, sponsored the summit. An entire day was set aside as “Business Day.”

The Johannesburg summit was called to address issues as varied as the AIDS epidemic, global warming and poverty. It was intended to continue the work begun at the Earth Summit held in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro in 1992. That assembly produced a document pledging environmental improvement and a betterment of living standards around the world.

The Rio summit was widely acknowledged to have been a failure. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan attributed the lack of progress on the issues it raised to “too few resources, a lack of political will, a piecemeal and uncoordinated approach and continued wasteful patterns of production and consumption.”

One of the major products of the Rio summit was a pledge by industrial countries to voluntarily reduce greenhouse gas emissions—which cause global warming—to 1990 levels by the year 2000. This goal has not been met. On the contrary, global consumption of fossil fuels increased by 10 percent from 1992 to 1999.

The Kyoto protocol on global warming, which had its roots in the Rio conference, has been rendered ineffective by the decision of the United States to withdraw from the treaty. Temperatures around the world continue to rise, with record highs expected for the year 2002. The series of environmental catastrophes of the summer—characterized by alternating drought and flooding in many areas—highlights the potential dangers of continued global warming, which tends to generate climactic gyrations.

The other stated goals of Rio have fared no better. The summit pledged to improve biodiversity, but according to the UN, the extinction rate of species is accelerating. It aimed to slow deforestation, but deforestation is continuing, with a net annual loss in forest area of 0.2 percent during the

1990s.

A World Bank report released recently paints a devastating portrait of the state of the world, should it continue along the same path for the next several decades. The report predicts a vast increase in poverty and environmental problems.

While Rio pledged to improve social conditions, over the past decade there has been a sharp increase in social inequality on a global scale.

Another goal was an improvement in water distribution and sustainability. Demand for water is expected to increase by 50 percent over the next 30 years, which could lead to severe shortages in some regions. According to the UN, by 2015 at least 40 percent of the world's population will live in regions where it is impossible or difficult to have access to adequate water supplies. Over 13,000 people die each day from illnesses associated with contaminated water, and 2.4 billion people live without proper sanitation.

That the Rio summit failed to produce any real results is hardly surprising. The document it produced was toothless, consisting of many pious hopes and a few unenforceable targets. The summit in Johannesburg was presented as a forum that could provide a framework for solving all of these unsolved problems and many more.

The basic conclusion that the conference reached was that the only way to solve these complex social and environmental problems is to rely on businesses and the profit motive. Annan told corporate leaders on Business Day, “The corporate sector need not wait for governments to take decisions. We realize that it is only by mobilizing the corporate sector that we can make significant progress.” He appealed to companies to invest more in underdeveloped countries in order to solve the problems of social inequality that make these countries “fundamentally unstable.”

The American government was the most obvious and direct proponent of eliminating governmental regulations and more directly catering to corporate interests. It opposed even the most nominal of targets and goals, such as a nonbinding pledge to increase to 15 percent the proportion of energy coming from renewable resources.

Accordingly, the US was the leading supporter of the “partnership” solution, which had widespread acceptance at the conference. Instead of global targets, partnerships are meant to be local agreements between corporations, governments and other agencies to carry out different development projects. Several hundred such partnerships were announced at the meeting, though many were not new initiatives.

The Business Action for Sustainable Development (BASD)—a conglomeration of national chambers of commerce dominated by European countries—announced 230 partnerships between businesses and NGOs.

The UN has tasked corporations with cleaning up the mess and solving the problems that they have themselves created. For example, the UN has abandoned its policy of relying on governments to solve the AIDS crisis. Instead it hopes that a rapid dying-off of the workforce in some countries will stimulate companies to provide aid.

Echoing these conceptions, the *New York Times*, in its summit published September 6, made the bald and absurd assertion that “AIDS will be conquered only with the help of drug companies.” In fact, the giant pharmaceutical companies have been principally responsible for the lack of widespread access in large parts of the world to inexpensive AIDS medication.

Other partnerships include an agreement between the French water company Suez and the municipal authority of the South African city of Queenstown. The company hopes to privatize the local water supply and make a profit. Other schemes along these lines have sharply increased water prices, exacerbating the problem of scarcity for the majority of the population.

In addition to the general promotion of business interests, the summit was characterized by the sharp divisions between its main participants. These two factors combined to create a final document even more vague and toothless than that which emerged from Rio.

These divisions were especially pronounced on the question of global warming and alternative energy sources. European oil companies, such as BP and Shell, as well as BASF, have advocated renewable energy targets. BP is the world’s largest producer of photovoltaic cells used in producing solar power, and Shell is heavily invested in wind farms. The European Union (EU) promoted a plan at the summit that called for 15 percent of the world’s energy to be produced from renewable non-carbon sources by 2010.

American energy producers have traditionally been much more closely tied to oil, and the Bush administration itself has numerous ties to the oil industry. Moreover, the Bush administration has consistently opposed any international treaties that place constraints on American corporations, even nonbinding agreements such as those drawn up in Johannesburg.

Together with Canada, Australia, Japan and the OPEC countries, the US adamantly opposed any mention of specific targets for renewable energy production. The final document merely called for the world to develop “advanced, cleaner, more efficient, affordable and cost-effective energy technologies, including fossil-fuel technologies as well as renewable energy technologies.” It advocated “action, where appropriate” to “phase out” subsidies that support oil production, “taking fully into account the specific conditions and different levels of development” of the participating countries.

The EU traded its abandonment of energy targets for an agreement with the US to halve by 2015 the number of people worldwide without access to basic sanitation. No provision was included to enforce this goal. A similar agreement was made to manage production of chemicals to minimize their adverse effects on human health and the environment by 2020.

The conference decided not to include multilateral accountability rules for corporations operating in underdeveloped countries. Such rules had been sharply opposed by businesses in the US and Europe. Neither did they have the support of leaders from underdeveloped countries, who benefit from the exploitation of resources and labor in their own countries.

The US and European governments were united in opposition to a provision calling for cuts in agricultural subsidies. Such reductions would threaten domestic agribusiness profits by cheapening imports from underdeveloped countries. Farmers in wealthy countries receive hundreds of millions of dollars in agricultural subsidies annually—the bulk of which go to agribusiness concerns—a policy that is devastating for small economies that rely on the export of primary agricultural goods. The EU also opposed eliminating subsidies for industries such as commercial fishing that threaten certain natural resources, though the final document contained a vague commitment to restoring depleted fisheries by 2015.

On foreign aid, the developed countries resisted calls by “Third World” countries to increase the amount provided and eliminate restrictions. The US, in particular, has insisted that any aid be tied to economic and

political reforms that open the economies to foreign capital.

The conditions in which the conference was held highlighted the fact that it was tailored to the interests of a financial and corporate oligarchy, whose profit requirements took precedence over social and environmental problems that affect the world’s population. The summit was held in Sandton, one of the richest suburbs of Johannesburg. Political and corporate leaders were provided with the most lavish accommodations. The conditions of Sandton contrast sharply with those of the adjacent areas of the city, such as Alexandra, characterized by tin shacks and open sewers.

The conference itself generated an enormous amount of waste. An attempt to raise funds to counter the environmental impact of holding the conference fell dismally short of its goal.

Conference delegates were protected by 27,000 police officers, who were employed to control the severely restricted protests staged by different activist groups and local political organizations on August 31. Only those granted permission by the South African government were allowed to participate. Shoulder-to-shoulder riot police were in place to seal the protestors from conference participants, with water cannon and armored vehicles on hand, if needed.

The protests provided a hint of the extensive opposition that exists to the pro-business policies promoted at the conference. One demonstrator was quoted as asking, “What is the summit doing for us? It is providing for the rich, not the poor.”

Placards denounced Bush as a “toxic Texan,” while others opposed American plans for a war in Iraq. The protestors submitted a memo to the conference demanding land, jobs and clean drinking water for everyone.

Police broke up an earlier rally staged by the Landless People’s Movement, a local political organization demanding land reform. Over 70 people were arrested. When US Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke at the end of the conference, he was interrupted for several minutes by hecklers.

Several NGOs condemned the pro-business orientation of the conference. Charles Secrett, director of the Friends of the Earth, said, “The Earth Summit should have been about protecting the environment and fighting poverty and social destruction. Instead it has been hijacked by free market ideology, by a backward looking US administration and by global corporations that keep reactionary politicians in business.” The environmental organization Greenpeace and anti-poverty group Oxfam were invited to join in conference negotiations, but both ended up pulling out in protest.

However, none of these organizations offer a viable perspective to oppose the pro-business positions expressed at the summit. All base their perspective on pressuring one or another section of corporations or national governments. During the conference, Greenpeace joined forces with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, which includes polluters such as Shell, Monsanto and the mining giant RTZ. In line with sections of European industry, they called for an “international framework” to counter global warming.

While denouncing the United States, many of these organizations bemoaned the fact that the Europeans did not stand up for real solutions, presumably along the lines of the Rio Earth summit. They based themselves largely on the hope that European governments would acquire some backbone and fight for international accountability and binding frameworks. NGOs have pledged to renew their campaign for such a binding agreement at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting next year.

The results of the Johannesburg summit provide further proof that this perspective is hopelessly utopian. If anything, the WTO is more openly subservient to the interests of global corporations than the UN. Nor is the EU more interested than the US in serious steps to eradicate poverty or improve the environment, as is evident from its position on agricultural

tariffs and other issues. Europe has presented itself as an advocate of renewable resources both for economic reasons and as a lever in its escalating conflict with the American government.

No more viable is a perspective based on alliances with different corporations. Some companies may indeed have an interest in temporarily securing a local supply of clean water or sustaining the lives of workers. An attempt to seriously address the problems of AIDS or water contamination, however, requires a massive social investment on a global scale, which is incompatible with a system based on the private accumulation of wealth.

It is not just a question of a few greedy corporations, but of a socioeconomic system based on relentless competition between different corporations and different national governments that represent these corporations. The capitalist system prohibits serious consideration of any aims beyond private economic gain.

Indeed, as the economic crisis around the world deepens, economic and political tensions are becoming more and more strained. This has only increased the demand by corporations for deeper attacks on the social conditions and living standards of the world's population. This process is clearly expressed in the course of the UN summit, characterized as it was by deep conflicts between the major powers and the subordination of the whole process to business interests.

The issues raised at the UN summit are of enormous importance to the world's population. However, they can be seriously addressed only as part of a socialist and internationalist perspective that opposes the capitalist system on the basis of the interests of the working class. Only such a perspective provides an alternative to the outmoded nation-state system and the corporate interests that this system defends.

The precondition for the realization of this revolutionary perspective is the construction of an independent and international political party of the working class, which advances the interests of the vast majority of the world's population in opposition to international capital and its political servants—from the UN to the politicians and parties of the bourgeoisie—in the oppressed countries as well as the imperialist centers.



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