

Obama blocks climate change agreement

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In the course of his current trip to Asia, US President Barack Obama has insured that the upcoming United Nations Climate Conference, due to take place in Copenhagen December 7-18, will be nothing more than a talk shop.

An estimated 40 world leaders and representatives of 190 nations are due to take part in the Copenhagen conference, which has the task of producing a new agenda for tackling global warming to replace the Kyoto Protocol of 1997.

Last Sunday, Obama gave his consent to a plan worked out at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Singapore that delays any binding agreements on climate change until next year at the earliest. The deal was supported by many of the world's leading greenhouse gas emitters, including the United States, China, Russia, Japan, Indonesia and South Korea.

According to figures published by the International Energy Agency, China was the leading emitter of carbon dioxide in 2007, closely followed by the US. When it comes to carbon dioxide emission per head of the population, however, the US is far ahead of any other country, with 19.1 tons, dwarfing China's 4.6 tons.

As was the case with the Kyoto Protocol—which expires in 2012 and was never ratified by the American government—the US is playing the main role in undermining any binding agreement to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Obama has adopted the Bush administration's policy of demanding that China accept binding targets before the US takes any measures.

The hypocrisy of Obama when it comes to the issue of climate change is brazen. In September, Obama addressed a United Nations conference, proclaiming “the historic recognition on behalf of the American people and their government [that] we understand the gravity of the climate threat.” Aside from a change in

rhetoric, however, Obama's policy differs little from that of his predecessor, on climate change as with everything else.

After his talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao on Monday, Obama declared that the United States and China were seeking a deal at the Copenhagen summit that would “rally the world.” The agreement struck in Copenhagen should have “immediate operational effect,” he added.

In fact, just one day previously Obama had struck a deal with the Chinese president at the APEC meeting that robs the Copenhagen summit of any substance. This is how the US administration seeks to “rally the world.” Obama has still not confirmed whether he will attend the conference in Copenhagen.

While leading industrial nations pointedly refuse to undertake measures to tackle climate change, environmental experts and scientists are warning of the grave consequences of a failure to curb greenhouse emissions.

At an international climate change conference held in Oxford, England at the end of September, the German climatologist, Stefan Rahmstorf, declared that a one-meter rise in sea levels was likely this century. If world governments do not arrive at effective agreements to halt global warming, the rise in sea levels will be even more dramatic.

A sea level change of just one meter will have an enormously disruptive impact on a large portion of the world's population that resides in coastal areas. Low-lying coasts and islands will be submerged, dispossessing tens of millions of people. A two-meter sea rise will flood or submerge entire cities. In the case of the United States, such an increase in sea levels will wipe out parts of urban areas in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Jersey and New York.

Rising temperatures and the associated disruption of weather patterns will have devastating consequences

for agricultural production, water distribution and disease management worldwide. As always, the poor will feel the effects most acutely.

The inability of the major capitalist powers to agree to any effective countermeasures is rooted in two factors, both inherent in the capitalist system.

First, though climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution, international cooperation is prevented by the conflicting interests of different nation-states. These conflicts have been intensified by the economic crisis.

Despite the efforts by Obama to put a positive gloss on his talks this week with President Hu, the differences between the two countries are considerable and continue to mount. China is Washington's leading creditor, as America's budget deficit soars to a record \$1.42 trillion.

The US and Chinese administrations accuse one another of maintaining cheap currencies to further their interests, and both countries are involved in tit-for-tat punitive trade sanctions.

Similar rivalries are growing between other leading world economies. Every major power fears that any concession with regard to environmental protection could disadvantage its domestic business interests in the furious struggle for the domination of world markets.

Second, a rational, scientific response to climate change is blocked by the subordination of every aspect of economic and social life to the principle of private profit and the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

In a report dealing with the issue of developing vitally needed renewable nontoxic energy sources, the UN estimated that governments worldwide would need to invest \$500-600 billion per year. While this sum is large, it is still a fraction of the funds made available by the US government to bail out its banks (as much as \$23 trillion by one account). Across the globe, capitalist governments, following the lead of the US, have made clear that their priority is profit returns for big business and the banks, not a healthy planet.

The option favored by Obama himself is a free market approach to global warming, involving "cap and trade" measures, whereby the government would provide huge incentives to corporations to modestly reduce carbon emissions, while turning pollution into a

tradeable commodity.

The failure of major capitalist nations to undertake any serious measures to combat growing environmental dangers is an indictment of the capitalist system. It is also a blow to all those environmentalists and "Greens" who argue that it is possible to pressure capitalist governments to undertake "environmentally friendly" policies.

Climate change and other pressing environmental problems can be solved only through the utilization of mankind's intellectual, productive and financial resources as part of a rationally organized, democratic effort carried out on an international scale. This requires the socialist reorganization of society.

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