# Copenhagen Climate Summit: The gulf between rhetoric and reality

**Peter Symonds**
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Even before the two-week climate summit begins today in Copenhagen, Denmark, the goal of a legally binding international treaty to limit greenhouse gas emissions has been ruled out. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol is due to expire in 2012 and Copenhagen was widely touted as the venue where a replacement document would be agreed. The more limited aim of a political consensus to meet the benchmarks of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is also highly unlikely.

UN climate change head Yvo de Boer told the BBC yesterday, as an estimated 18,000 delegates, officials, lobbyists and scientists began to gather, that things were in "excellent shape". "Never in 17 years of climate negotiations have so many different countries made so many pledges. Almost every day now governments are announcing pledges—it's unprecedented," he said.

What de Boer failed to add was that the present pledges, even if fully realised, fall far short of what most climate scientists say is necessary to contain global warming and its potentially disastrous consequences. The deep divisions between the major powers and various blocs that were on display at the previous UN-sponsored summit in Bali in December 2007 have already surfaced in the lead-up to Copenhagen.

Before the Bali conference, the IPCC released a major report which called for a cut in carbon emissions of 25 to 40 percent by the advanced industrial countries by 2020 compared to 1990 levels and a global emissions reduction of 50 to 80 percent by 2050. While the European powers, together with China, India and other emerging industrial countries, pressed for the inclusion of a reference to the IPCC emission targets in the final statement, the US led a bloc of countries, including Japan, Canada and Australia, that blocked the move and demanded that so-called developing countries agree to targets. Under the Kyoto Protocol, developing countries are not bound to cut emissions.

The Copenhagen summit will be dominated by the same disputes. While everyone will pay lip service to the need to take united action to rein in global warming, each national delegation will primarily seek to defend its own narrow economic interests at the expense of its rivals. The lack of any substantive agreement among the major powers led Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, who is hosting the summit, to suggest last month that a legally binding treaty would have to wait until next year.

The gulf between rhetoric and action is particularly evident in the case of the Obama administration. Unlike his predecessor Bush, who for most of his time in office refused to admit the reality of global warming, President Obama declared earlier this year that he understood "the gravity of the climate threat" and promised "to meet our responsibility to future generations". However, his proposals for limiting emissions fall well short of the IPCC targets.

The US, until 2006 the world's largest carbon emitter and now second to China, has never ratified the Kyoto Protocol. In line with pending Senate and House legislation, Obama has supported reductions in greenhouse emissions of 17 percent by 2020 compared to 2005 levels. Against the standard UN benchmark of 1990 levels, the cuts are far smaller—amounting to a reduction of just 3-4 percent by 2020. Moreover, even this limited proposal faces concerted Congressional opposition.

Opposition is being voiced not only by major US energy interests. In conditions of a continuing economic crisis in the US and globally, critics of the emissions legislation argue that US manufacturers would be unfairly disadvantaged if they had to cut emissions while China did not. "If we passed a bill that the rest of the world didn't follow, Uncle Sam would become Uncle Sucker and export all our jobs to China," Republican Senator Charles Grassley told a finance committee meeting last month.

China, along with other developing countries such as India and Brazil, has rejected any binding commitment to reducing emissions, arguing that its per capita emissions are far lower and also that the advanced industrialised countries are primarily responsible for the rise in greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere over more than a century and should bear the major burden of halting the trend. Beijing announced last month that it would cut carbon intensity (the amount of carbon emitted per unit of GDP) by at least 40 percent by 2020 compared to 2005 levels, but a lower rate per GDP unit does not translate into an overall reduction in emissions. Brazil and India have also proposed reductions in carbon intensity of 38-42 percent and 24 percent respectively by 2020 compared to 2005.

Other developing countries, particularly a bloc of 42 small islands and coastal states mostly in the Pacific and Caribbean, are pressing for the advanced industrial countries to make deeper cuts to carbon emissions and to provide substantial economic aid to assist in coping with the impact of climate change and making their own emission reductions. Offers of immediate assistance from the major powers are expected to amount to no more than $7-10 billion, far short of the $75-100 billion that the World Bank calculates is required each year. Other estimates are much higher.

Leading energy exporters such as the Gulf States, Canada, and Australia have been resistant to major cuts in emissions. Saudi Arabia's top climate negotiator seized on the recent controversy over leaked emails by climate scientists at the University of East Anglia to question any connection between human activity and global warming. The Gulf States have been arguing for compensation for loss of export revenue if the use of fossil fuels is wound back.

Australia only ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2007 after the Labor Party took office. However, despite his rhetoric about the need for action, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is committed merely to emission cuts of between 5 to 25 percent by 2020. Not only are the reductions from 2005, not 1990, levels, but larger cutbacks are subject to an international agreement that meets Australian demands. The government's proposed carbon trading scheme was blocked in the Senate after sharp divisions in the Liberal Party resulted in the ousting of opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull and a reneging on a previous agreement to pass the legislation.

The political crisis in Australia points to the vested interests at stake at Copenhagen. While Turnbull's opponents represent mining and energy-intensive industries, those supporting the carbon trading scheme are backed by finance capital and are attracted by the prospects of transforming Australia into the hub of a highly lucrative regional carbon market. Under the cap-and-trade schemes established under the Kyoto Protocol, businesses are allocated emissions "credits" which can be sold to other corporate polluters if their carbon output falls under their allocated "cap". Extra credits can be generated by activities such as reforestation in developing countries.

The largest and most profitable carbon market is the European Union's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS)—which has a carbon trade estimated at more than $100 billion annually. The major European powers are promising emission reductions of 20-30 percent by 2020 over 1990 levels and pressing for an agreement at Copenhagen, calculating that they can maintain and extend their dominance in world carbon trading. Within the EU, however, there are continuing sharp differences over sharing out the burdens, with countries like Poland, which is heavily dependent on coal, arguing for special relief.

Most of the signatories to the Kyoto Protocol, including the European powers, are not on track to meet its modest emissions targets by 2012. Yet, even if an agreement over targets is reached at Copenhagen in the next fortnight, its implementation will primarily be through an extension of the carbon trading schemes that have proven to be a failure. As it was at the Bali conference in 2007, the International Emissions Trading Association is likely to be a major presence at the Copenhagen summit.

In an interview last week with the *Guardian*, eminent American climate scientist James Hansen was scathing in his condemnation of carbon trading schemes, saying they represented a "fundamentally wrong" approach. "I think it's just as well that we not have a substantive treaty, because if it is going to be the Kyoto-type thing, and people agree to that, then they'll spend years trying to determine exactly what that means and what is a commitment, what are the mechanisms," he said.

"The whole idea that you have goals which you're supposed to meet and that you have outs, with offsets [sold through the carbon market], means you know it's an attempt to continue business as usual," Hansen added. He compared trading in the right to pollute to the selling of indulgences by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, saying: "The bishops collected lots of money and the sinners got redemption. Both parties liked that arrangement despite its absurdity. That is exactly what's happening [today]."

Despite his justified criticisms of the carbon trading schemes being advocated at Copenhagen, Hansen has no alternative. Along with various economists and institutions, he has in the past advocated the imposition of a carbon tax to force down the demand for fossil fuels and encourage the use of alternative energy sources. As well as being highly socially inequitable, a carbon tax continues to rely on the anarchic capitalist market that is driven by short-term profits, not long-term social and environmental needs.

As the various national delegations haggle in Copenhagen over their competing interests, climate scientists are warning that the scientific research since the 2007 IPCC report was released not only confirms its findings but indicates that a number of trends associated with global warming are accelerating faster than previously expected. A report published last month by a group of scientists, including many of the IPCC's lead authors, warned that to prevent global temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees Centigrade above pre-industrial levels, global carbon emissions must peak between 2015 to 2020—that is in the next 5 to 10 years—then decline rapidly, with a near-zero carbon emissions world economy well before the end of the century. (See: "Global climate diagnosis worsening")

The chasm between what is scientifically needed and what will be discussed at Copenhagen underscores the incapacity of the profit system to meet any of the basic needs of mankind, including the long-term viability of the environment. While the dangers of global warming cry out for an integrated and planned international response, the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system, and between social production and private profit—make that impossible.

To achieve the reduction in global carbon emissions required, nothing less than a complete reorganisation of the global economy is needed on a socialist basis. An internationally coordinated plan is necessary to restructure the world's industrial and agricultural sectors, as well as reorganise energy generation, transportation and urban planning not only to end the danger of a catastrophic climate breakdown, but to provide every human being with a decent, secure standard of living.