

World climate conference: Conflict outside and inside Copenhagen meeting

Patrick Martin
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Danish police battled several thousand demonstrators in the streets outside the world climate conference in Copenhagen, while inside the delegates of the major imperialist powers, China, India and dozens of less developed countries clashed over conflicting proposals to deal with the worldwide impact of pollution caused by industrialization, deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels.

More than 260 protesters were arrested and many were teargassed, hit by pepper spray or beaten with batons as police repeatedly charged into the ranks of the demonstrators. Most of those demonstrating were in Copenhagen to demand emergency action against global warming and the climate-related deterioration in living conditions, particularly for people living in vulnerable coastal areas and island states.

Wednesday's protests were on a smaller scale than the huge march on the weekend, where nearly one thousand were arrested. The organizers of the march, Climate Justice Action and Climate Justice Now!, are environmental coalitions linked to NGOs, liberal reformist groups like Attac, and nominally "left" and social democratic parties in Europe.

The perspective of the demonstration, reflected in the slogan "Reclaim Power," was that protest in the streets and forcing entry into the conference venue could pressure the meeting of capitalist governments to adopt a more responsible and farsighted environmental policy. Dozens of activists actually did enter the conference center despite the police cordon, where they staged a protest against the exclusion of nongovernmental groups and representatives of indigenous peoples. Two demonstrators reached the main stage and began shouting "Climate justice now!" before being removed by security guards.

The police were able to prevent any sizeable incursion into the conference, using dogs, shields, water cannon and

armored vans to block access routes and push back most of the demonstrators. They also beat back a group of delegates who tried to leave the conference center and make a show of sympathy for the protests.

Inside the conference, a crisis atmosphere prevailed, with bitter exchanges between the representatives of the US, Britain and other industrialized nations, and those from Africa, Asia and Latin America. At one point Monday, delegates representing all 77 of the poorest nations staged a walkout to protest the intransigence of the rich countries, which are demanding that any climate agreement lock in their economic advantages, permitting double the per capita carbon consumption of the Third World.

On Wednesday, the chairwoman of the conference, former Danish environmental minister Connie Hedegaard, resigned, handing over the gavel to the host country's prime minister, Lars Loekke Rasmussen. Hedegaard claimed this was to give the chairmanship to a head of government for the final two days of the conference, when more than 100 heads of government are due to attend, including US President Barack Obama and Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

But delegates from many of the poor countries had demanded her resignation after it became known that Denmark was privately circulating a document, drafted by the US and Britain, which would consign the poor countries to permanently lower levels of economic development than the wealthier countries. Under this plan, the rich countries would be assigned a quota of 2.67 tons of carbon emissions per capita by 2050, compared to 1.44 tons for the poor countries.

Even the usual face-saving resolution may prove beyond the abilities of the conference delegates, in view of the intransigence of the US and its allies, who demanded that India and especially China accept binding emissions standards, while the US delegation rejects any

similar commitment for its own industries, citing the necessity for congressional approval of any agreement.

Voicing a sentiment widespread among the delegates from the poor countries, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela denounced the position of the US-led bloc. He pointed to the trillions of dollars used to bail out the banks in the United States and Western Europe, telling the assembly, “If the climate was a capitalist bank, they would have already saved it.”

The European Union took a position opposed to both the US and China, urging both countries to raise their targets for reducing emissions. Europe has established an emissions trading system that allows the wealthier states to purchase carbon credits, essentially permits to pollute; insures the profits of the oil and power generation companies and other big polluters; and has actually allowed overall emissions to increase.

There have been clashes between multiple factions among the 193 countries represented in Copenhagen, over emission standards, the financing of the transition to energy-efficient technologies in poor countries, and the enforcement mechanism.

In the face of appeals by environmental scientists to reduce rich-country emissions of greenhouse gases by 40 percent by 2020 compared to 1990 levels, the EU has offered only a 20 percent cut, the US a mere 3-4 percent cut. Neither figure would be a significant contribution to averting a potential climate catastrophe.

The enforcement mechanism is a particularly touchy subject, since all delegates at the conference are aware that under the Clinton administration, the US participated in the drafting of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, and then Vice President Al Gore hailed it as a pathbreaking agreement. But the White House never submitted the protocol to Congress for ratification because of bipartisan opposition. A similar fate is likely for whatever agreement may emerge in Copenhagen.

The EU, Japan and other industrialized countries that ratified Kyoto want to extend the quotas established there, to the benefit of their own economies, while the Obama administration has demanded a separate agreement that would apply to China and India as well as the US. China and India reject any binding international treaty in favor of voluntary pledges, and China, in particular, has rejected any form of international monitoring of its industrial policies.

The clash between China and the US is particularly explosive, given that Washington is attempting to strongarm the regime that is its principal creditor, with a

hoard of dollar-denominated reserves exceeding \$1 trillion.

While China has refused any international supervision of its compliance with emissions standards, the Democratic-controlled US Congress has threatened to impose trade sanctions in retaliation. According to the *New York Times*, “A group of 10 Democratic senators wrote to Mr. Obama two weeks ago warning that the Senate would not ratify any treaty that did not protect American industry from foreign competitors who do not have to meet global warming emissions limits.”

US officials said that the climate talks had entered “crunch time” and there was still the possibility of a broadly based agreement once Obama and other top decision-makers arrive in Copenhagen. However, the two-week conference has already demonstrated that there is no remedy for the damage inflicted on the world’s environment within the framework of capitalism and the nation-state system.

No action will be taken that impinges on the profits of the giant capitalist firms that produce and use fossil fuels, and no coordinated worldwide effort is possible given the conflicts between rival national interests.

Despite the mythmaking of the ultra-right press in the United States, there is no serious disagreement among scientists in any region of the world—North America, South America, Europe, Africa or Asia—over the objective impact of greenhouse gas emissions on the planet’s ecosystem, and the long-term danger of global warming. But a rational, science-driven response to the climate crisis comes into conflict with entrenched profit interests and the nationally-based capitalist ruling classes of the major powers.

No amount of pressure or protest around the theme of “climate justice” can persuade the capitalist billionaires and their political representatives in Copenhagen to act against their own class interests. The defense of the environment can be undertaken only by a turn to the international working class, the only social force whose interests are not tied to either capitalist profit or the nation-state system, and the building of a mass movement of working people based on socialist principles.



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