

Great powers sacrifice climate on the altar of profit

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Scientists around the world are agreed that in order to avert a catastrophe the speediest possible action is necessary to halt man-made climate change. In the coming decades, the living conditions of billions of people are threatened by rising sea levels, storms, droughts and the loss of harvests.

Despite the urgency of finding a solution to global warming, the representatives of 193 states at the world climate conference in Copenhagen last week were utterly incapable of agreeing on any effective steps to reduce global levels of greenhouse gases. The verdict on the conference by environmental groups and broad sections of the media was devastating. “What a disaster” begins the report on the conference on the online site of the German newspaper, *Der Spiegel*. “Shame, farce, disaster” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

After two weeks of discussions, the conference delegates produced a final text of barely three pages that is non-binding. It outlines goals generally recognized by scientists to be completely inadequate to deal with the danger of accelerating global warming.

Several smaller countries objected to the agreement, hashed together in closed-door meetings. In the end, conference participants did not commit to accept the deal, and instead voted to “take note of the Copenhagen Accord.”

The presence of around a hundred heads of government during the last two days—including US President Barack Obama, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy—did nothing to break the deadlock. It was once again the US president who laid down the parameters for the final agreement, reassuring right-wing political circles in the US that the United States “will not be

legally bound by anything that took place here today.” Obama’s declaration of US self-interest was echoed by other leading industrial nations.

In the final analysis, it was the antagonistic interests of the major economic powers—in particular, the US, China, and the European Union—that prevented any agreement. The two weeks of disputes in Copenhagen had more to do with strategic interests, commercial conflicts and competitive rivalries than with how to rescue the world’s climate and environment.

The leading industrialized countries addressed the issue of their CO₂ emissions entirely from the standpoint of the economic and strategic interests of their respective ruling classes. In fact, the geostrategic questions behind the discussions in the Danish capital are the same as those that resulted in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and numerous other international conflicts.

According to the estimates of the International Energy Agency, demand for energy worldwide will rise by more than 50 percent over the next twenty years. The economic strength of a country will depend considerably upon its access to sources of energy. This is why the US has invested around one trillion dollars in wars aimed at securing its supremacy over the world’s most productive oil and gas reserves.

With its military presence in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan—the gateway to Central Asia—the US is not only securing its own energy needs. It seeks to obtain an important lever to apply pressure on its rivals in Europe and Asia, which are heavily dependent on imported energy from the Middle East. The development of alternative technologies would reduce the dependence on fossil fuels, which still constitute nearly 80 percent of world energy consumption. The US has little interest in spending billions on pollution-

free technologies that could help make its rivals more independent.

Additional pressure is exerted by the lobby of those energy groups and industries dependent on fossil fuels. They regard any reduction of CO₂ emissions as a cost factor and obstacle to their competitiveness, undercutting profits. They have repeatedly used their power to sabotage any effective emission-reduction measures in the US Congress.

Finally, the leading industrialized countries, which at present consume half of the world's energy, are using the issue of climate change as a weapon against developing nations, whose energy consumption is increasing commensurate with their industrialization.

In Copenhagen the US demanded that emerging and developing countries, in particular, China, commit themselves to concrete and verifiable reductions of their CO₂ emissions. Representatives of the 77 poorest nations vehemently protested against this attempt at blackmail.

China, whose industrial expansion is based particularly on heavy industry, has rejected any inspection process into the verifiability of its environmental measures as an unacceptable violation of its national sovereignty. It argues that the older industrial nations are responsible for global warming, rather than the newly developing countries. It therefore demanded financial support for developing countries to reduce their CO₂ emissions. China has also expressed the concern that carbon emission limits could become a rationale for imposing trade barriers—a position advocated by sections of the US political establishment.

For its part, the US has offered only a 17 percent reduction in its CO₂ emissions by 2020 compared to 2005. Based on the levels established in the Kyoto agreement of 1997, which the US never ratified, this represents a reduction of less than 4 percent. As is the case on the question of war and social issues, there is little substantive difference between the climate policies of Obama and that of his predecessor, George W. Bush.

The European countries, in particular, Germany and France, have sought to present themselves as responsible and environmentally conscious, in contrast to the US and China. The European Union declared it was prepared to lower the continent's CO₂ emissions by around 30 percent by 2020, instead of its previous

pledge of 20 percent. In addition, the EU promised during the first week of the summit to contribute €7.2 billion to developing countries over the next three years.

However, the EU member states are just as keen to advance their own economic interests as the US and China. Most scientists agree that even a reduction of around 30 percent in emissions is not enough to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius. Moreover, the EU states have made their offer conditional on a comparable reduction by the US and China.

Germany and France, which lack fossil energy reserves and are highly dependent on imports, hope to reduce their dependence through the development of alternative technologies. In this respect, they are in conflict with the US. At the same time, they are counting on winning markets for their new technologies.

Meanwhile, the carbon credit-trading scheme has already become a vast moneymaking enterprise.

The climate conference in Copenhagen proves that it is impossible to implement a scientifically guided and internationally coordinated policy to prevent a climatic disaster within the context of the capitalist system. The private ownership of the means of production and the system of rival nation-states, upon which capitalism is based, exclude any rational policy based on common social interests and needs. The major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Europe, are using the issue of climate change to impose an agenda reflecting their own economic and political interests.

Even the most radical forms of protest are incapable of halting this self-destructive policy, which inevitably leads to new wars, misery and environmental disaster. The only genuine solution lies in the unification of the international working class on the basis of a socialist program to rationally organize society and production worldwide according to the needs of humanity, including all necessary measures to protect the environment from a climate catastrophe.

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