

Capitalism and the climate change crisis

Patrick O'Connor
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The International Energy Agency has reported that a record 30.6 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide poured into the earth's atmosphere last year. The updated data indicates that average global temperatures are now almost certain to rise by more than 2°Celsius—regarded by many climate scientists as the threshold for unmanageably dangerous climate change. IEA chief economist Fatih Birol concluded that avoiding this level of warming was now merely “a nice utopia.”

The situation represents a damning indictment of the capitalist system. Climate scientists have issued repeated warnings about the severe dangers of global warming, together with unambiguous estimates of the sharp reductions in greenhouse gas emissions required to avoid catastrophe. Yet successive international summits of world leaders—including Bali, Indonesia in 2007, Copenhagen, Denmark in 2009, and Cancun, Mexico in 2010—have ended in farce. No binding agreement on reducing emissions has proven possible, with every government competing against one another to gain geo-strategic advantage and boost the profits of their own major corporations.

The process is set to repeat itself again this December when world leaders meet in Durban, South Africa. Preparatory talks are now underway in Bonn, Germany, but senior American and European Union officials have already ruled out any possibility of participants negotiating a legally binding emissions treaty.

The latest International Energy Agency data shows that carbon emissions were slightly lower in 2009 than they were in 2008—reflecting lower energy consumption in the aftermath of the financial crash. But in 2010 pollution rose again, finishing 5 percent higher than the previous record set in 2008. This has put paid to the hopes expressed by some climate scientists that the

global economic crisis would suppress emissions for long enough to allow some “breathing space” for world governments to negotiate a solution.

An examination of the emissions data reveals the severity of the climate crisis. To stabilise the concentration of atmospheric greenhouse gases to 450 parts per million of carbon dioxide equivalent—a level at which scientists estimate there is merely a 50-50 chance of avoiding 2°C warming—annual emissions must be no greater than 32 gigatonnes by 2020. With last year's emissions at 30.6 gigatonnes, the IEA explained that “this means that over the next ten years, emissions must rise less in total than they did between 2009 and 2010.” Moreover, the body concluded that about 80 percent of projected emissions in the next decade from the power sector are already “locked in”, because they are from power plants that are currently in place or under construction.

The exact consequences of a 2°C average warming of the planet are unforeseeable. Climate change is not a linear phenomenon, incremental increases in temperature can suddenly produce sharp changes in the earth's environment, such as the melting of the Arctic icecap, which may in turn trigger accelerated warming.

Scientists nevertheless expect mass extinctions, deforestation and desertification, sea level increases that threaten the very existence of some low-lying countries, and far more severe extreme weather events—including drought, storms, and floods—leading to mass migrations caused by famine and coastal inundation.

Climate change will also heighten tensions between the imperialist powers, with changed weather patterns altering important sea lanes, opening up new resource rich areas for exploitation, and heightening the strategic

significance of fertile, food producing areas. The situation in the Arctic is indicative—as the ice disappears, the US, Canada, Denmark, and Russia are scrambling for control of newly accessible oil reserves and previously frozen naval routes. American diplomatic cables recently released by WikiLeaks noted that the Danish government is openly discussing a “carve up” in the Arctic, while Russia is preparing for war.

Nicholas Stern of the London School of Economics responded to the 2010 emissions figures by warning that at the current rate, there will be a 50 percent chance of 4°C warming by the end of the century. “Such warming would disrupt the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people across the planet, leading to widespread mass migration and conflict,” he told the *Guardian*.

In 2006, Stern advised the then Labour government in Britain that global warming represented the “greatest market failure the world has seen.” Every attempt since then to forge a “free market” solution to the crisis has been an abject failure. The conversion of greenhouse gas pollution into a tradeable commodity via carbon trading schemes has enriched various financial speculators and increased the cost of living for working people while doing nothing to lowered emissions by the necessary levels. Recent studies have concluded that the marginal reductions of carbon pollution in Europe and other advanced economies are largely due to shifting manufacturing and other production facilities to China and other low wage platforms.

Climate change is another destructive expression of the fundamental contradiction between the nation-state system, upon which capitalism rests, and the globally integrated world economy. The environmental crisis requires an international solution, yet no rational plan can be developed as great power rivalries escalate with the rapidly eroding global hegemony of the US and rise of China and other aspiring hegemons.

At the same time, the private ownership of the means of production stands as an insurmountable obstacle to the rational utilisation of available technologies to address global warming. The major transnational oil

conglomerates and other corporate polluters actively sabotage the adoption of any environmentally beneficial measures regarded as a threat to their profits.

The problem is not a lack of available resources. The International Energy Agency estimates that additional energy research and development spending of \$US10-\$100 billion annually would cut global emissions in half by 2050. The higher figure, \$100 billion, is less than the American military will spend this financial year for the war in Afghanistan. The sum also represents less than one-third of the combined wealth of the richest ten individuals in the US.

The only realistic perspective for addressing the climate change crisis is one based on an internationalist and socialist program. Within a democratically planned world economy—oriented towards satisfying social need rather than maximising profit and the accumulation of private wealth—the world’s scientific and technological resources can be harnessed in a rational manner. To adequately lower carbon emissions, a sweeping restructuring of energy generation, industrial and agricultural production, and urban and international transport is required, while at the same time ensuring a substantial increase in the world population’s living standards. The first necessary step is the international working class developing its own revolutionary leadership in the struggle against the profit system.



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