

Bitter rivalries dominate Durban climate summit

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More than 10,000 government officials, advisers, scientists and other delegates from over 190 countries are meeting in Durban, South Africa for the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) UN Climate Change Conference. The summit, which runs until December 9, is supposed to advance measures to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. The major powers, however, are bitterly divided and have already concluded that no legally binding or environmentally effective agreement is possible.

Durban is set to join the list of UN summits that failed to take significant action to resolve the climate change crisis—Bali, Poznan, Cancún and, most prominently, Copenhagen. Two years ago, US President Barack Obama and many other heads of state and government met in the Danish capital amid great fanfare promising a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol. In the end, however, the summit disbanded in a debacle, without a single agreed binding commitment. The deliberately lowered expectations for the Durban summit are reflected in the minimal international media coverage of the event.

The Obama administration now insists that there is no pressing need for a post-Kyoto treaty restricting carbon emissions. Jonathan Pershing, US deputy envoy for climate change, declared earlier this week in South Africa: “I’m not sure that the issue of legal form will be resolved here, or needs to be resolved here.” He hailed the voluntary pledges to reduce emissions that were announced at last year’s UN climate change summit in Cancún, Mexico. “To my way of thinking, that’s an enormous way forward in solving the problem,” he said.

These remarks underscore Washington’s key role in sabotaging any progress toward a new climate treaty. The replacement of George W. Bush by Barack Obama as US president in 2009 has seen a change in rhetoric on climate change coming from the White House, but no major policy shift regarding the Kyoto Protocol and the development of a

successor agreement. The priority has remained to ensure that nothing is agreed that either impinges on the interests of US corporations or harms the economic and geo-strategic position of US imperialism against its rivals.

The voluntary pledges on carbon emissions praised by Pershing as a “way forward” are grossly inadequate. The UN Environment Programme last week issued a report explaining that the existing pledges, if enacted in full, would see carbon emissions in 2020 reach a level that was 14 percent over the threshold to generate average global temperature increases of more than the dangerous 2 degrees Celsius mark.

Moreover, it is extremely unlikely that the voluntary promises will ever eventuate. At last year’s climate summit, to take just one example, delegates boasted that from 2020 a new “green fund” would deliver \$100 billion annually to so-called developing countries. The BBC reported 12 months later: “There is no agreement on where the money should come from. Developing countries say the public coffers of industrialised nations should be the main source, whereas Western governments say the bulk must come from private sector sources.”

Evidence continues to accumulate detailing the urgent threat that climate change poses to the world’s population. The International Energy Agency (IEA) issued a major report last month warning about the impact of “locked in” carbon emissions. To have a chance of avoiding 2 degrees Celsius global warming, most climate scientists estimate that atmospheric carbon dioxide must be kept below 450 parts per million (ppm). It currently stands at about 390 ppm. According to the IEA, 80 percent of this 60 ppm “buffer” has already effectively expired through emissions that will be generated by existing fossil fuel based energy and industrial infrastructure.

If current trends continue, the IEA added, by 2017 the

entire emissions buffer will be eliminated through locked-in energy and other projects. Then, the report concluded, there would be “no room for additional power plants, factories and other infrastructure unless they are zero-carbon, which would be extremely costly.”

The *Guardian* commented: “The IEA’s data is regarded as the gold standard in emissions and energy, and it is widely regarded as one of the most conservative in outlook—making today’s warning all the more stark.”

National governments throughout the world nevertheless continue to evade taking action.

The emissions targets set for the advanced capitalist countries under the Kyoto Protocol, which fall far short of what is required, are set to expire in 2012. The Protocol’s provisions, allowing for a second round of binding targets, will not be utilised. Japan, Russia, Canada and other countries have insisted they will veto any extension of Kyoto. These powers say that the treaty cannot continue while the Obama administration maintains its predecessor’s refusal to ratify and be bound by it. They, like the US, also insist that China and others must agree to binding targets.

Brazil, South Africa, India and China—the so-called BASIC countries—have called for Kyoto to be continued. They have said they will accept “nationally appropriate mitigation actions,” but not mandatory commitments like those incurred by the advanced countries under Kyoto.

The European Union is supportive of an extended Kyoto phase, but only if a binding agreement for a post-Kyoto treaty that includes the BASIC countries is reached by 2015 and enacted by 2020. The EU’s drive for more stringent global emission restrictions is not driven by concern for the environment, but by definite economic calculations. The major European economies are among the least dependent internationally on fossil fuels and could gain a competitive advantage if their rivals were compelled to cut carbon emissions.

Moreover, a lucrative trade and speculation in carbon credits, centred in London and Frankfurt, has emerged through the European Emissions Trading Scheme. This mechanism was established and developed within the legal framework of the Kyoto Protocol. The sovereign debt crisis in Europe has already badly affected the carbon trade, with the value of credits plunging in recent weeks. A purely voluntary framework for emissions, as urged by Washington, could further undermine the carbon credit

market, in which British and European banks have a significant stake.

Amid the manoeuvres of the major powers, the representatives of the world’s smaller, impoverished states—including some whose very existence is threatened by climate change—are sidelined, bullied, and manipulated at the UN summits.

A report released on Monday by the British-based World Development Movement detailed the testimonies of “insiders” at the Copenhagen and Cancún events. The report stated: “The US said they would deny climate finance to Bolivia and Ecuador because they had objected to the Copenhagen accord proposal. The EU’s Connie Hedegaard had also suggested that the small island-state countries could be ‘our best allies because they need finance’.” One official explained that developing country negotiators who come to be regarded by the major powers as a nuisance “are taken out of delegations for one reason or another, or booted upstairs, or suddenly are transferred, or lose their jobs, as a result of external pressures, usually in the form of some kind of bribe (not necessarily money), or exchange.”

The Durban summit again underscores the impossibility of resolving the climate change crisis under capitalism. An international solution is urgently required, yet no effective plan can emerge amid escalating great power rivalries that are being fuelled by the global economic breakdown. Moreover, the profit interests and political power of the major corporations stymie any rational reorganisation of the world economy in the interests of the planet and its population.

The necessary restructuring of energy generation, industrial and agricultural production, and transport infrastructure—utilising existing technologies and developing others to adequately lower carbon emissions while also raising the world population’s living standards—is possible only in a socialist society.



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