Doha conference highlights national divisions over climate change

Bryan Dyne
3 December 2012

The Doha 2012 United Nations Climate Change Conference, which began November 26 and will run through December 7, has been characterized by irreconcilable national divisions and the lack of any serious proposals to address climate change.

The Doha conference is the latest under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It comes after failed talks in Rio this year, a Copenhagen conference in 2009 that the US walked out of and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which established the goal of cutting emissions for the 40 signatory nations by at least 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

The conference location itself is an indication of the focus of the talks. The hosting country of Qatar is a longstanding ally of the US in the Middle East and the highest emitter of greenhouse gases per capita in the world. During the opening speech of the conference, former Qatari oil minister Abdullah Bin Hamad al-Attiyah attempted to divert any responsibility away from Qatar, stating, “We should not concentrate on the per capita (emissions). We should concentrate on the amount from each country.”

The ineffectual discussions at Doha contrast with the severity of the climate change crisis and the many indicators that the global climate is reaching a tipping point.

In the midst of the conference, the World Bank issued a report, “Turn Down the Heat,” which outlines the potential impact of an average global temperature increase of 4º C and the likelihood that this will occur within the next century. It predicts a 20 percent chance that such a temperature increase will occur by 2100 even if countries hold to their emission reducing agreements. The temperature increase is predicted to occur by 2060 if the agreements are not held to.

Consequences of such a global increase in temperatures include ocean acidification and the loss of coral reefs, rising sea levels and loss of coastlines, and widespread crop failures. This is in addition to the higher probability of extreme weather events.

The current talks are formally an attempt by the 200 participant nations to reach the so-called Durban Platform, an agreement which would take effect by 2020 to slow climate change, primarily by countries reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, as with previous summits, such as the Rio+20 conference that occurred over the summer, the promises and pledges by various countries will be as vague as possible or will simply go unrealized.

The main division at the conference is between the United States and China. In particular, the US has insisted that China accept hard constraints on its emissions, while the US has resisted any effort to implement binding targets.

Other tensions have also emerged. On Friday, India and Brazil accused the “developed” world (particularly the US) of doing little to prevent the rise in greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide. Mira Mehrishi, the head of India's delegation, said, “We are disappointed... that the developed countries are in the process of locking in low ambitions.”

This was echoed by Brazil's delegation, headed by Andre Correa do Lago, who said, “Many developed countries are not...concentrating on their main problem, which in general is energy.”

The statements come after an attempt by the US to preempt criticisms towards itself, when the US delegation stated at the beginning of the conference, “Those who don't follow what the US is doing may not be informed of the scale and extent of the effort, but it's enormous.” This is a fraud. Since coming to office four years ago, the Obama administration has done virtually nothing to address carbon emissions, following the basic path put in place by Bush.

Qatar itself has plans to hold a ministerial-level meeting

© World Socialist Web Site

outside of the formal conference schedule which would draft a new text for the conference outside the framework of negotiation. This runs the risk of causing the talks as a whole to collapse.

Further divisions exist among the advanced countries. The Doha talks have been presented as a means to revive the Kyoto Protocol and extend it past 2012. However, Russia, Canada, New Zealand and Japan have all issued statements to the effect that they will not sign to a second commitment period, which would begin January 1, 2013.

Under these circumstances, only the European Union and Australia would remain in the framework of an extended Kyoto Protocol. The United States was never a part of the Kyoto Protocol.

An element of cynicism towards the talks was introduced by the head of the UN's climate change secretariat, Christina Figueres. Recognizing that the Doha talks—and discussions on climate change in general—have been ineffectual, she lamented on the perceived lack of public support for climate change and called on individuals to “assume responsibility.” She added, “It's not just about domestic governments.”

There is not a lack of public support to address climate change, but rather a well-deserved lack of faith in the ability of the major states to do anything. All the various governments involved are guided by the profit interests of competing sections of the capitalist class. Any serious coordination and scientific approach is impossible within this framework.

Figueres’ remarks are essentially an admission that the world capitalist system and the system of rival nation-states are incapable of solving the climate crisis. The rivalry between nation-states, chiefly that of the US and China, actively undermines all serious attempts to address the impending climate crisis because it would interfere with national interests. Solutions to such problems, which require global solutions, first and foremost require the working class breaking the political stranglehold of the nation-state system over social life.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site