Climate change and the capitalist system

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Hundreds of thousands of people are expected to participate in Sunday's People's Climate March in New York City and in related events around the globe. Those who participate, especially the large numbers of young people, express a growing popular concern over the impact of global warming on the world's environment.

The scientific evidence for climate change is overwhelming and irrefutable. Every year, new reports from the world's leading scientists document the impact of high levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses on the environment, along with warnings that immediate action is necessary to avert a catastrophe. Already, the consequences of climate change can be seen in increased incidents of major weather events, including droughts, floods, deadly storms and other disasters.

Yet, there is a clear contrast between the urgency of the situation and the absence of any significant response from the political establishment. This contrast is the product of the basic fact that it is impossible to resolve climate change and other major environmental problems within the framework of the capitalist nation-state system.

For this reason, the perspective on which the People's Climate March is organized offers no way forward. Appeals to the United Nations, to the governments of the major world powers, to President Obama, and to the billionaires who underwrite many of the environmental organizations—all such efforts will accomplish nothing.

From the standpoint of science and technology, the framework of a policy to address climate change is clear. The phasing out of fossil fuels, for example, and their replacement by renewable energy sources like wind, solar, thermal, hydroelectric and biomass, could be accomplished through a major, coordinated public works program on a world scale.

Any serious proposal to remedy the effects of climate change and halt and reverse global warming, however, runs up against two insuperable obstacles: private ownership of the means of production by a handful of capitalist billionaires, and the division of the world into rival capitalist nation-states.

The giant corporations and banks that are the world's real rulers represent the interests of an insignificant minority of humanity—in the first place, the 2,000 or so billionaires who constitute a global financial aristocracy more rapacious, arrogant and reactionary than the French nobility before 1789 or the Tsarist landowners and capitalists before 1917.

A few dozen energy corporations monopolize the world's oil and gas resources and regard any diminution in dependence on fossil fuels as a threat to their gigantic profits. These companies, in turn, are inextricably linked to the major banks and financial institutions.

The capitalist nation-state system likewise constitutes an impenetrable barrier to rational policy-making on climate change and other environmental issues, which must be, of necessity, carried out on a global basis. Each of the powers involved in global climate talks—the United States, the EU, China, Russia, the OPEC countries—looks at the issues from the standpoint of the interests of its own ruling class, not the survival of humanity.

The American ruling class plays the most reactionary role, refusing to abide by the Kyoto agreement and torpedoing talks at Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban. The Obama administration, after coming to power pledging to take measures to address global warming, has dutifully functioned as an arm of the corporate and financial elite and the military-intelligence apparatus. No less than those who flatly deny global warming, the Democratic Party is opposed to any significant measures to address environmental problems.

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The real role of the Obama administration was summed up in two actions taken this week. On Tuesday, the Environmental Protection Agency shelved new standards for carbon emissions from US power plants until after the November 4 election in a brazen effort to curry favor with the energy monopolies. On Thursday, the US Congress gave final approval to Obama's plans to invest $500 million in pro-imperialist "rebel" forces in Syria, as part of its drive toward a wider Mideast war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that not a single step forward can be taken in the struggle against climate change without a break with American and world imperialism and an open declaration of war against the capitalist system itself. Only the independent mobilization of the international working class, on the basis of a socialist program, offers a way forward.

In that context, we entirely reject claims that the threat to the environment is caused by economic development in general, by the allegedly too-high living standards of working people, or by overpopulation. Such conceptions, which date back to Thomas Malthus in the early days of capitalism, represent a reactionary effort to blame the human race for the problems caused by the capitalist mode of production.

Socialism means an advance beyond capitalism, not a retrogression to a smaller and more primitive form of life. The earth can sustain a growing population with an average standard of living far above that which now prevails under capitalism.

The social basis for overthrowing capitalism is the working class. This does not mean the trade unions, many of which are participating in the People's Climate March. The unions have long since ceased to represent the working class. They now play a critical role in carrying out a relentless assault on jobs and living conditions, while doing whatever they can to bolster the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

The unions and organizations that orbit around them (including many nominally "socialist" organizations) see the climate demonstration as an opportunity to bolster the Democratic Party and its fortunes in the upcoming elections.

The SEP and our co-thinkers internationally fight for a revolutionary program, including the nationalization of all the major corporations and banks under the democratic control of working people. This must become the starting point for the rational reorganization of the world's economy to serve the needs of the masses—including their environmental needs—not private profit.

This transformation must be accomplished through the international unification of the working people of all countries, the abolition of national borders and the nation-state system, and the creation of a world federation of socialist republics that works to abolish economic inequality.

The fight for this program requires the building of a political leadership of the working class. We urge those participating in the climate demonstrations and protests to contact the SEP, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and make the decision to take up the fight for world socialism.

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