

Paris climate talks accomplish nothing to curb global warming

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The United Nations climate change summit commenced this past Monday with 150 heads of state and tens of thousands of representatives from national governments, businesses and the NGO industry converging on Paris. Despite its supposedly historic significance, the 21st Conference of Parties, or COP 21, promises little more than the previous 20 failed annual conferences.

Regardless of whether a final agreement is reached, the most ambitious scenario demonstrates once again the inability to address climate change in any meaningful way under capitalism.

The centerpiece of negotiations in Paris consists of formalizing voluntary commitments to limit carbon pollution by individual countries made over the past several months. Yet even if every pledge is fully enacted, with all national sources honestly accounted for, global emissions would remain on a trajectory to increase global temperatures relative to pre-industrial levels by an average of 2.7C by century's end. During the 2009 climate conference in Copenhagen, national governments resolved to remain below the 2 degree threshold, beyond which scientists caution catastrophic impacts are possible.

The agreement under discussion in Paris, however, would not legally require any country to actually achieve their targets. Instead, the most that is acceptable to the Obama administration and other major world leaders is a procedural obligation to pursue nonbinding goals. As economic or political conditions change, governments are free to revise or renege upon these commitments.

Nevertheless, politicians and pundits are playing up the summit as a potential turning point for climate change. "Never have the stakes on an international meeting been so high," remarked French President Francois Holland in the opening plenary. German Chancellor Angela Merkel added, "Our very future as humankind hinges on this. ... Billions of people are pinning their hopes on what we achieve here in Paris."

Notwithstanding the rhetoric, there is no denying that the expected agreement falls woefully short, even in its ambition, of what is scientifically necessary to protect humanity from the worst consequences of a warming planet. Justifications that such is the limit of what is "technically feasible" or "politically practical" only serve as an indictment of the economic and political setup.

The industrial capacity exists to transition to entirely renewable sources of energy within a matter of a few decades or less, as a recent study by Stanford researcher Mark Jacobson concluded for the United States. However, the level of planning and coordination on an international basis needed to implement such a transition comes into immediate conflict with the division of the world into rival nation-states and private ownership of the world's productive resources.

The pledges put forward correspond to the needs of the banks and major transnational corporations. Some establish absolute carbon reductions, others merely slow "business as usual" growth, or carbon intensity per economic output. Cumulatively they allow for continued global growth of greenhouse gas emissions, reaching a level 26 percent higher in 2030 than in 2010. Industry remains free to shift energy-intensive production to the most profitable areas, factoring in the lowest fossil energy costs.

COP 21 has continued the trend of growing participation and influence of businesses. With more than 180 business events over the two weeks, the summit resembles a trade show as much as a negotiating session. Corporate leaders joined political leaders to urge "bold" action at Paris. We Mean Business, a coalition representing 350 companies with \$8 trillion in revenues, "aspires to an international agreement that stimulates the private sector and makes it a partner with governments in implementing ambitious climate action," according to a statement on their web site. Even several fossil fuel

companies, including Shell and Total, have—publicly, at least—argued for a price to carbon.

Behind this growing role of big business at the conference is a drive among a section of supposedly forward-thinking companies to shape the outcome of international climate policy in a way that minimizes the risk to profits and even opens up avenues for new spoils. The summit is not only an advertising opportunity to tout their “green” credentials, but the serious business of ensuring that any agreement advances market-based climate policies. All that is external to the market (carbon dioxide emissions, unexploited tropical forests) is to be allocated at market value, to be bought and sold, manipulated and profited from.

While expectations are high for a deal to pass next week, it is by no means guaranteed. Disagreements are arising over the extent to which the national commitments will be enforceable, the value of climate-related foreign aid from wealthy to poor countries and intellectual property rights. In the first week of discussions, India emerged as the most prominent voice of dissent, criticizing a proposed system to monitor and revise country-specific emission targets every five years. Indian negotiators stressed the historic responsibility of industrialized countries for the climate crisis, in an attempt to win concessions for native business interests in the form of access to advanced technology and increased development funding.

However, underlying these often staged disputes are bitter conflicts that extend far beyond environmental issues. Behind the scenes, the spying, threats and bribes revealed by WikiLeaks at the Copenhagen climate summit is without question continuing. The primary concern of the major powers is to emerge from the climate talks in a strengthened position relative to its rivals.

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Despite a bilateral deal on emission reduction commitments last year, tensions between the U.S. and China are beginning to surface at the climate talks, albeit in a muted form thus far. The remarks by Obama and Xi on the opening day alluded to these conflicts: Obama stressed the need to hold countries accountable for their pledges, while Xi highlighted the needs of developing countries to reduce poverty.

A recurring component of the annual climate summits has been vocal street protests and other direct action. Organizers planed another large series of demonstrations in Paris, but the Socialist Party government in France

used the terror attacks to impose police state measures. President Hollande has maintained a ban on all demonstrations, rounding up those who disobey and placing organizers under house arrest. Under conditions of soaring class tensions, the French ruling class is compelled to outlaw any form of opposition.

The organizations behind the planned protests in no way represented a political challenge to the dictates of the corporate and financial elite or their ministers and diplomats assembled in Paris. The common aim of the myriad of liberal environmental and activist groups is to apply pressure on capitalist governments, acting as a counterweight to the profit interests of the fossil fuel industry. They fundamentally represent the interests of sections of the middle class, seeking to temper the worst excesses of capitalism, to carve out a more comfortable (and sustainable) existence within the current setup.

The basic orientation of the multitude of pseudo-left groupings involved in the protests is no different. Groups like the International Socialist Organization in the US tail behind and glorify the climate change protests. To the extent they make criticisms, it is merely to inject into the demonstrations a more radical coloration. The protests must also take up issues of racism and forge links with the trade union apparatus, they argue. All the better for pulling along leaders who “continue to drag their feet.”

After 21 years of failed conferences and impotent protests, political lessons must be drawn. The task confronting masses of workers and youth, whose future hangs in the balance, is to fight for the reorganization of society on the basis of human need, not private profit. Complex international issues like climate change cannot be addressed on the basis of an outmoded division of the globe into rival states. Such a struggle cannot be successful if it is confined to the protest politics of the pseudo-left. Rather it must be based on the working class, as the only force capable of socializing production on an international scale.



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