

New climate change report: Impact of global warming “already being felt”

Bryan Dyne

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A US government report published Friday, the congressionally mandated Fourth National Climate Assessment, has driven renewed attention to the dangers of climate change and the ongoing problems caused by Earth’s warming climate. It makes clear that the impacts of climate change are “already being felt” and that “[f]uture climate change is expected to further disrupt many areas of life, exacerbating existing challenges to prosperity posed by aging and deteriorating infrastructure, stressed ecosystems, and economic inequality.”

The report comes from the US Global Change Research Program and was produced by 13 federal agencies and more than 300 scientists who specialize in climate research. The first volume discusses the science behind climate change and the data showing that global average temperatures are 1.1 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. It reaffirms the decades of scientific research showing that the current global temperature trends are caused by “human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse gases.”

While the assessment does not discuss the sources of greenhouse gas emissions, it must be pointed out that the category “human activities” does not include every human equally. The 2017 Carbon Majors Report showed that 70 percent of all greenhouse gases released from 1988-2015 came from just one hundred companies, all of which are controlled by multimillionaires and billionaires in the capitalist classes of the major countries.

The second volume details the impact global warming has already had and will have on different regions of the US. Extreme weather events such as Hurricane Michael, which killed dozens of people in October, and the Camp Fire, which is likely to have killed hundreds in California, will become normal. Data collected on 49 cities predicts that the dozens of deaths caused each year by extremely hot and cold days will increase exponentially, reaching 9,300 by 2090. Diseases including dengue, Zika,

chikungunya, and yellow fever will become more common. West Nile infections are expected to double by 2050, as higher temperatures provide better conditions for mosquitoes and other parasitic organisms.

Higher temperatures also have the potential to drive famine. As temperatures increase, areas such as the Midwest will produce 75 percent less corn and 25 percent fewer soybeans. Longer droughts are expected in the Great Plains, reducing the region’s output of wheat, barley, potatoes, beans and other crops that are staples for the US and internationally. Fresh water sources across the country will become scarcer, especially during summers.

Another consequence of climate change will be increased internal migration. According to the United Nations, approximately 210 million people globally have been forcibly displaced as a result of extreme weather or droughts since 2008. While most of these climate refugees are from South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the 26,000 residents of Paradise, California that no longer have homes are among the several tens of thousands within the US that fall under this category, a number that will only grow as global warming intensifies.

Such conditions are socially explosive. As the assessment notes, the impact of climate change is not distributed evenly. “People who are already vulnerable, including lower-income and other marginalized communities, have lower capacity to prepare for and cope with extreme weather and climate related events and are expected to experience greater impacts.” In other words, those who can least afford wildfires, floods, disease and famine will be the ones who will suffer the most.

For its part, the Trump administration’s response to the report was representative of the more ignorant and pig-headed sections of the US capitalist class. Trump himself tweeted two days before the report, “Brutal and Extended Cold Blast could shatter ALL RECORDS - Whatever happened to Global Warming?” ignoring the massive

body of science showing the difference between local weather patterns and global climatic shifts. The day the report was released—deliberately, on the Friday of the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, when news coverage was slight—a White House spokeswoman attempted to downplay the report, claiming that the assessment was “largely based on the most extreme scenario” and thus not reflective of reality.

This does not mean that the Democrats, whatever their “left” posturing, provide a progressive alternative to the Republicans on the issue of climate change. Bernie Sanders claims that the solution is to “transform our system to sustainable energy,” and that by doing so the US “would lead the world in saving the planet” and “create millions of decent-paying jobs.” Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez continues her attempts to pressure Nancy Pelosi and other leading Democrats into creating a special “Select Committee on a Green New Deal.”

What is missing from the remarks of all of Trump’s rivals in the political establishment is the systemic source of climate change—capitalism.

Global warming is not an intrinsic product of industrial development itself—that is the myth propounded by reactionary Malthusians and some “deep ecologists,” who advocate a return to primitivism. Global warming is caused by industrial development driven by the profit interests of an ever smaller and more rapacious clique of capitalist owners, who have no concern for the health and welfare of either the human population or the ecosystem as a whole.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the techniques of advanced production have spread to every country of the globe. All countries contribute to the production of greenhouse gases and deforestation, which are the main drivers of climate change. As a result, any effort to halt rising worldwide temperatures must be inherently international to have any chance of success. Despite the claims of Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and their allies, no reduction of greenhouse gas emissions within the borders of the United States would bring a halt to rising worldwide temperatures.

This applies to every country. The track record of capitalist governments the world over—including every international agreement and climate summit—shows that none of them are capable of solving the ever-growing crisis posed by climate change. The same divisions between nation-states and rival corporations that have produced economic catastrophes and military conflicts leading to world war prevent capitalist governments from

coordinating the resources necessary to fight climate change.

More fundamentally, climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution. No nation-state, even one under socialist rule, would be capable on its own of having a significant impact on vast processes involving the oceans, the entire land mass of the planet and the Earth’s atmosphere. Molecules of air and water pay no heed to national boundaries, and the isolated actions of national governments have no more impact on climate change than the decrees of King Canute could hold back the tide.

These considerations must provide the point of departure for the international working class in developing a realistic strategy for combating the dangers of global warming and climate change.

The working class is the only class that has no social interest in maintaining the irrationality of private ownership of the means of production and the division of the world into separate, warring nation-states.

As with the other catastrophes produced by capitalism—poverty and mounting social inequality, fascism and attacks on democratic rights, and the growing threat of imperialist war—climate change is a class question whose solution requires the conscious political mobilization of workers in every country. Only through the world socialist revolution, which makes possible the organization of production on a global scale, scientifically planned and democratically controlled, can humanity gain full and unfettered access to the scientific, technological and creative capacities needed to arrest and reverse the unfolding environmental catastrophe.



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