

# Climate change reports warn of a world on the brink

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Last week's reports from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the World Resources Institute point to the increasing risk of a climate change-induced environmental catastrophe inflicting untold suffering on billions of people.

The UN report, "Climate Change and Land," demonstrates that 821 million human beings already suffering from hunger face starvation as the land on which they depend for sustenance loses its ability to support agricultural infrastructure. These men, women and children are part of a broader 3.2 billion people who are living in areas that will be eroded, flooded, turned into deserts or destroyed by wildfires, hurricanes or cyclones in the coming decades.

The World Resources Institute's Aqueduct project reports that 17 countries in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, comprising a quarter of the world's population, are in peril of using up their available fresh water. This "Day Zero" scenario would cause droughts that are four times as costly as floods—destroying crops, causing power outages, increasing the risk of preventable diseases and potentially causing mass migrations of hundreds of millions of people, stressing water supplies in even more parts of the globe.

There is no doubt that global warming caused by the burning of coal, oil and natural gas for over a century has led to these social crises. The transformation of arable land into desert, the disappearance of coastal areas resulting from rising ocean levels, and the sinking of cities due to the melting of permafrost have all been linked in hundreds of studies to climate change. These are part of broader processes that have produced more intense heat waves in the past decade and more rapid melting of glaciers.

Such trends are in line with numerical predictions made as early as 1896, which showed that burning fossil fuels and the resulting release of carbon dioxide would warm

the planet's surface. This was reflected in a 1912 newspaper short from New Zealand asserting that the two billion tons of coal being burned every year were adding about seven billion tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, which "tends to make the air a more effective blanket for the earth and to raise its temperature."

These early estimates of greenhouse gas emissions have been verified and updated every year since 1958, when the measurement station at Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii began recording a continual increase in the concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere. Like clockwork, the release of more and more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere has preceded a rise in the planet's average global temperature, a trend that has been escalating since the 1980s.

Of greater concern in the modern era is the fact that Earth's climate is entering a qualitatively different stage. For the past half century, humanity's industrial activity has rivaled geophysical processes in its influence on the changes in the Earth's environment. An article published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States (PNAS) titled "Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene" warns that the current shifts in the Earth's climate are poised to accelerate.

Global warming, the study predicts, is feeding into other geophysical processes that aren't directly related to carbon dioxide emissions, such as the mass release of methane from permafrost melting. This convergence threatens to produce a "Hothouse Earth," where global warming quickens and is no longer directly related to the burning of fossil fuels. Such a scenario would be exponentially more difficult for modern scientific techniques to contain.

The consequences of such a development would be catastrophic. The extreme weather events of the past decade would be only the precursors of much more devastating storms, longer heat waves, dryer droughts and

nonstop wildfires. Coral reefs across the world would die, eliminating significant parts of the food chain. Glacial melting and sea level rise would flood every coastal city on the planet, home to approximately one third of the world's population, potentially drowning billions of people. At least one million of the Earth's species would die and continent-scale portions of the world's surface would become uninhabitable.

The PNAS report is one of many published in the past decade calling for the reorganization of the world's energy production and transportation infrastructure and the development of new technologies to immediately halt carbon emissions. Such data has not stopped US President Trump from slashing climate research by various federal agencies by up to 84 percent in his proposed budget for fiscal year 2020.

The political Neanderthals in the White House and their fascistic co-thinkers the world over, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, do not see the deaths of billions of men, women and children as a cataclysmic event, but rather as the cost of doing business to further enrich themselves and their fellow oligarchs.

This does not mean that politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her "Green New Deal" offer any solution to the climate crisis. They pose the problem as one that can be solved on a purely national basis, as if the flow of air in the atmosphere can be stopped by a customs checkpoint. Even the much-vaunted Paris Agreement, supposedly an international accord to halt climate change, is both inadequate and toothless, as demonstrated by Trump's withdrawal two years ago.

At the same time, the measures proposed by the ruling elites are seen as weapons to be used against their geopolitical rivals. The carbon trading schemes promoted by the United Nations are directed less to limiting greenhouse gas emissions than to providing new means for the older industrialized countries to undercut the developing economies, which burn a great deal of coal and oil to fuel their economies. Such schemes have played a key role in the efforts of the United States to contain and cripple China.

A number of Democratic presidential candidates, including Cory Booker, John Delaney, Jay Inslee and Pete Buttigieg, are promoting a "climate corps" as an extension of the "Green New Deal." They thereby seek to mobilize youth to defend US "national security" under the guise of fighting climate change. The concept has been touted as a 21st century version of the Peace Corps and a "soft power" check against Russia and China.

The attitudes of supposedly "progressive" representatives of the ruling class demonstrate that there exists among them no constituency to tackle global warming. They operate within the confines of the nation-state system and never challenge the private ownership of production, the two main factors that stand in the way of a rational, scientifically guided international transformation of economic relations and methods to halt and reverse carbon emissions.

This demonstrates, as Frederick Engels presciently indicated in *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, that capitalism itself is the primary obstacle to solving threats to the natural environment.

"All hitherto existing modes of production have aimed merely at achieving the most immediately and directly useful effect of labor," he wrote. "The further consequences, which appear only later and become effective through gradual repetition and accumulation, were totally neglected ... In relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominantly concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result."

As if to emphasize Engels' analysis, the 2017 Carbon Majors Report showed that 70 percent of all greenhouse gases released from 1988 to 2015 came from just 100 companies. An Oxfam report published concurrently with the signing of the Paris Agreement showed that the richest 10 percent of the world's population are responsible for 50 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, and that the poorest 50 percent are responsible for only 10 percent of emissions.

These studies expose as slander the statements made by bourgeois politicians, corporate media outlets, postmodernists and pseudo-left groups that global warming is caused by workers' "lifestyles," "diets" and "consumer culture." The Earth's environment is being polluted, poisoned and burned by the capitalist class and cannot be saved until this parasitic and destructive social layer is abolished. The social force to accomplish this task is the international working class. The method is world socialist revolution.



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