

Biden climate summit offers empty spectacle

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President Joe Biden convened a global summit of leaders from 40 countries Thursday, in a two-day event filled with empty promises from the world's largest producers and consumers of fossil fuels that they will change and do better—by 2030, or 2050, or 2060, or some deadline even further down the road.

As for a genuine global plan to tackle the dangers of global warming and climate change, that is nowhere to be found, since the affairs of world capitalism are determined by two factors: the profit interests of giant corporations and the super-rich, and the strategic interests of rival nation-states. Both these fundamental characteristics of world capitalism prevent an event like the global summit from having any real significance.

For the Biden administration, the event was a step toward the reassertion of “American leadership” on the issue of climate change, which was abandoned during the Trump administration, when US policy was subordinated to the outright denial of climate change that is the prevailing politics of the Republican Party. Trump withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord, an action which Biden has reversed, while appointing former Secretary of State John Kerry as his climate envoy to the world.

The claim of global leadership was somewhat compromised by Biden's performance Thursday morning, when he addressed the leaders of 40 countries, including China, Russia, India, Japan, Germany, France and Britain, as though he was speaking to an election rally of AFL-CIO bureaucrats in Pittsburgh.

He began by declaring, “I see an opportunity to create millions of good-paying, middle-class, union jobs,” and went on to cite the supposed benefits of his policies for electrical workers, oilfield workers, coal miners, autoworkers and construction workers.

Biden went from there to emphasizing the critical importance of slowing global warming, declaring that

the current decade is “the decisive decade” according to scientists. “This is the decade we must make decisions that will avoid the worst consequences of a climate crisis. We must try to keep the Earth's temperature to an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius.”

But while warning about the implications of an increase beyond 1.5 degrees, in terms of “fires, floods, droughts, heat waves, and hurricanes tearing through communities,” he echoed all previous US presidents and their counterparts worldwide in insisting on reliance on “the private sector,” i.e., the capitalist class.

At times, Biden's remarks were so incoherent that it was doubtful they could have been scripted, although he was reading from a teleprompter. Consider this paragraph, provided by the White House website, which must be taken as the official, authorized version. He was describing the financial resources that must be mobilized for the battle against climate change:

“Those dollars—those dollars being invested are often the hard-earned savings of our workers—pensions. We can't take steps to protect our workers if we don't step up. We have to be able to move forward from the downside deal, then into the upside, and strengthen the resilience of our financial system. I have directed my team to develop an approach to do exactly that.”

One does not envy the French, Russian or Chinese translators seeking to tackle this.

The keystone of Biden's address was his much-publicized pledge to reduce US emissions of greenhouse gases by 50 percent by 2030, compared to 2005, a level which has been criticized by climate scientists as inadequate, especially given the outsized role played by the United States as the world's biggest polluter over the past half century. This was combined with a pledge to reduce net total emissions to zero by 2050.

The supposed grandiosity of Biden's pledges swept some of his media admirers entirely off their feet. CNN

climate correspondent Bill Weir gushed that Biden's proposal was on the scale of "President Kennedy's pledge to go the Moon in ten years, World War II and the Industrial Revolution" all combined.

This is rather a lot to load on the shaky shoulders of a 78-year-old US president.

The WSWS has published an extensive analysis of Biden's plans for climate change, and the details need not be repeated here (See: The Biden climate plan, Part One: A drop in the ocean). Suffice it to say, that any plan that bases itself on the voluntary cooperation of the giant oil and chemical companies and the Wall Street banks is doomed from the start.

The half-measures proposed by Biden are likely to founder due to domestic political opposition. The fossil fuel industries dominate the Republican Party and significant sections of the Democratic Party, particularly in states like West Virginia (coal), and Ohio and Pennsylvania (fracking). There is little chance of passage of even fragments of Biden's proposals through the 50-50 Senate, and action in the House is also in question.

Even more critical is the question of global coordination. Biden himself admitted that the United States, with 15 percent of the world's emissions, cannot resolve the issue of climate change on its own. The US is the largest producer of fossil fuels, with Russia second, Iran third and China fourth.

Comparing that list with the directives of American foreign policy makes clear the absurdity of pretending that the global summit can have a significant effect. Biden was seeking the collaboration of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who he recently labeled a killer, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, whose government has been officially accused of genocide by the US State Department.

As for Iran, the third-largest producer of fossil fuels, it is being systematically blockaded by the United States, and its leaders denounced as terrorists and targeted for assassination by Israel, America's top ally in the region.

Iran was of course not invited to the summit. If Putin and Xi nonetheless attended the summit and made statements in support of a global effort against climate change, these were just as perfunctory, if less incoherent and parochial than those of Biden.

The European powers attended the summit and made

dutiful salutations to the return of American leadership on climate change under Biden. Japan and South Korea did likewise. Their contributions expressed relief that Biden and not Trump was representing the United States, but did not go beyond that.

The empty promises exchanged by all concerned cannot alter the fact that the main thrust of American foreign policy is to build up military and diplomatic pressure against Russia and China. The climate change initiative is itself an element in this global conflict, as the administration brands China the world's leading polluter and criticizes Russia for exploiting newfound oil resources in parts of Siberia accessible because of global warming.

The logic of American foreign policy is to prepare for war against Russia, China or both. If such conflicts escalated to the use of nuclear weapons, and there is no reason to think otherwise, climate change would take on a new and terrible meaning, threatening the extinction of humanity.



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