

International Energy Agency report underscores inadequacy of US government response to climate change

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The International Energy Agency (IEA), a Paris-based affiliate of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has released a special report outlining various pathways to ensure a world with a net zero carbon emissions rate by 2050.

The report, which is titled *Net Zero by 2050*, states that in order to achieve a carbon neutral world by that year producers will need to immediately stop any new fossil fuel production. This is only one of 400 “milestones” along the road to 2050, and its implausibility only underscores the difficulties of combining a rational, science-based response to the danger of climate change with the maintenance of global capitalism, driven by private profits and the interests of rival nation-states.

The report, issued May 17, is billed as “the world’s first comprehensive study of how to transition to a net zero energy system by 2050.” It promises to do so “while ensuring stable and affordable energy supplies, providing universal energy access, and enabling robust economic growth,” according to its press release.

Countries will need to increase solar and wind production by roughly 400 percent more than the current rate. This would occur with a phasing out of coal and gas plants, in favor of solar and nuclear plants, as well as the retrofitting of coal and gas plants with carbon capture devices, where the carbon will later be injected underground. According to the special report, this transition must finalize before 2040. As it stands, roughly 80 percent of the world’s energy grids are powered by fossil fuels.

By 2040, a significant amount of air travel would have to be done with renewable fuels like hydrogen. By 2030, the majority of cars sold would need to be

electric. By 2035 most vehicles involved in the transportation of goods would also need to make this transition.

The pathways described by the IEA also include enabling access to clean electricity and cooking to everyone in the world and making the world’s electric grid completely carbon neutral by 2040. “The sheer magnitude of changes needed to get to net zero emissions by 2050 is still not fully understood by many governments and investors,” stated IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol.

The agency, which functions as an advisor for numerous national governments, stated: “[c]limate pledges by governments to date—even if fully achieved—would fall well short of what is required” to achieve these goals. The report calls for “a historic surge in clean energy investment that creates millions of new jobs and lifts global economic growth.” The agency’s underlying assumption is that this can be done under capitalism.

The pathways and benchmarks provided by the IEA are based upon goals set by the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, a nonbinding pact which most leading world governments have signed onto. In addition to being unenforceable, the Paris Accord presumes that rival capitalist nation-states will put aside their differences for the sake of the environment.

A number of alternative approaches suggested by the IEA are problematic in their own right. Vast quantities of lithium are needed for the manufacturing of electric vehicles and for nearly every form of renewable energy. Without investment in proper recycling infrastructure, lithium extraction is itself an extremely damaging process to the surrounding environment.

Additionally, the vaunted target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is also worthy of criticism. Keeping temperature rises within this limit fails to take into account various climate feedback loops that could push the global temperature to increase past that point even if net carbon emissions cease.

Typifying such inadequate responses was US President Joe Biden's climate initiative announced on international Earth Day in April. The president unveiled his plan at a climate summit at the White House that was attended by numerous world leaders. A fact sheet presented by the White House declared that it has set "ambitious goals," which put "the United States on an irreversible path to a net-zero economy by 2050." Biden revealed that the United States would cut carbon emissions in half by 50 percent by 2030.

The emissions the Biden administration has pledged to cut in half are based on levels from 2005, a year with especially high pollution. Since 2005, the US has achieved a 14-15 percent decrease in overall emissions. This means that Biden, who will be long gone by 2050, can take credit for decreases that happened before he was even elected.

While the IEA's report called for an immediate stop to any new fossil fuel production within the US, the Biden administration has, within its first few days of power, issued 31 drilling permits on federal land. The Biden administration has also approved 22 offshore drilling permits to companies, such as Shell and British Petroleum.

Biden's Department of Justice (DOJ) recently contested a lawsuit brought forth by environmental groups to stop a Trump-approved oil extraction operation in northern Alaska. The project, dubbed "Willow," is expected to extract roughly 100,000 barrels of oil a day for the next 30 years.

Leaving aside the political improbability of the US actually following the path outlined in Biden's plan, there is a more fundamental issue: If the world as a whole is to reach net-zero emissions, this cannot be a matter of each of more than 200 countries separately reaching that goal. For many of the poorest countries, that would be a recipe for mass starvation. To overcome poverty and malnutrition, their energy consumption must grow.

A global solution to the climate change crisis thus necessarily requires global economic planning, which is

incompatible with both the nation-state system and the profit interests of nationally based corporations and banks.

The *New York Times*, the mouthpiece of the American ruling class, has sought to provide apologetics for the Biden administration. An article last month, headlined "Biden's Fossil Fuel Moves Clash With Pledges on Climate Change," sought to explain away the administration's hypocritical moves, saying: "Biden is trying to avoid alienating a handful of moderate Republicans and Democrats from oil, gas and coal states who will decide the fate of his legislative agenda in Congress."

In fact, the paralysis of the entire capitalist class in the face of the climate crisis is rooted not in this or that pragmatic maneuver but in the profit system itself. And in addition to all rational and scientific responses being contingent upon the profitability of various energy conglomerates, the ruling class is also seeking to gain ground against its various geopolitical rivals.

This is demonstrated by the White House fact sheet's declaration that the new climate initiative will "Center the Climate Crisis in U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security Considerations."

Biden has named former Obama Secretary of State John Kerry as his climate envoy. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in January, this appointment, as with the rest of Biden's agenda, is "driven, first and foremost, by the geopolitical needs of American imperialism." This related particularly to Washington's "predatory aims for the subjugation of China and Russia, which Washington regards as its two biggest military and security rivals," the WSWS explained.

From the recent unveiling of Biden's massive military budget proposal, which focuses on the US's mounting confrontation with China, as well as the administration's efforts to blame the latter for COVID-19, to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's abandonment of public health as the pandemic continues, the US capitalist class has made clear its intent to pursue profit at the cost of human life.



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