

South Asian leaders join other heads of state to back bogus climate targets at COP26

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The 26th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow, dragged to an end on November 13, with speeches at the “World Leaders Summit” demonstrating the event to be a cover for the ongoing capitalist pillage of the planet.

The more than 100 heads of states attending the two-week conference made pledges that they had no intention of keeping, for goals that will make no dent in the catastrophic climate-change trends predicted by scientists. Even the bourgeois media and commentators admitted it was an historic failure.

Tens of thousands marched in Glasgow condemning the “green wash,” while globally scientists, youth, students and others accurately denounced the event as a charade. Addressing protesters in Glasgow, climate-activist Greta Thunberg declared: “It’s not a secret now that COP26 is a failure, it has just become a PR event.”

In line with their international counterparts, South Asian leaders added their voices to the chorus of false promises. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Nepal Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba addressed the event live. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, however, opted out at the last minute citing “domestic issues.”

In a speech hailed by the mainstream media as a “game changer,” Modi declared that India was “the only big economy which has delivered in letter and spirit on the Paris Commitment [the previous CoP meeting resolution].” He went on to claim that “despite being 17 percent of the world’s population, India’s responsibility for emissions is only 5 percent.”

India’s “achievements,” Modi said, were that the country was fourth in the world in terms of installed renewable energy, its railways were targeted to reach “net zero” carbon emissions by 2030, and the government’s

LED bulb campaign is projected to reduce 40 million tons of carbon emissions per annum. Modi said India would reach net zero by 2070.

The rest of his speech was dedicated to ludicrously portraying ancient religious texts as a policy guide, and promoting the so-called Lifestyle for Environment collective action movement, which places responsibility for the climate crisis on the masses. “A mass movement of an environmentally conscious life-style,” he declared, “is what is needed for mindful and deliberate utilisation, instead of mindless and destructive consumption.”

Modi’s speech was filled with deceit. India’s low per capita carbon emissions are not due to any sustainable or environmentally responsible practices adopted by profit-hungry Indian capitalism. Instead they are a reflection of the abject poverty of the masses, who are deprived of the most basic energy needs and requirements.

India is currently the fourth largest emitter of carbon to the atmosphere, after China, the US and the European Union. Even by conservative estimates, its annual emissions are close to 3 billion tons of carbon dioxide. Much of these emissions are from its predominantly coal-based power infrastructure and the diesel-guzzling buses and trucks that constitute India’s highly inefficient road-based transport system.

The country’s meagre reductions in emissions in the industrial sector, and its increase in the non-fossil fuel fraction of the national energy mix by a few percentage points, are nowhere near the emission cuts required to reverse climate change. Modi’s pledge of attaining net zero by 2070 is contemptible, even by the much-criticised target of the Paris commitments, which required net zero to be achieved globally by 2050.

In fact, the very concept of “net zero,” according to three leading environment scientists—James Dyke, Robert Watson and Wolfgang Knorr—is a “trap,” based on the untested theoretical possibility of offsetting carbon

emissions in one place, with carbon removal elsewhere and using measures such as tree planting or carbon capture technologies (see: *The Conversation*). The concept, they write, diminishes the urgency of curbing gross carbon emission. “Offsetting” paves the way for various bargains and “market mechanisms,” such as carbon trading.

Modi’s fig-leaf pledges are bogus and have no possibility of being realised. A week before the summit, Indian authorities were refusing to give a commitment on net zero. The 2070 net zero target was a last-minute addition to Modi’s script, to try and appease those imperialist countries that were using CoP26 as a platform to wage diplomatic war against China and Russia, for their alleged lack of commitment to the climate issue. President Biden publicly criticised the Chinese leadership “for not showing up” to a summit on such a “gigantic issue.”

As Modi was speaking at CoP26, his government halved taxes on petroleum fuels, citing the need to “further spur the overall economic cycle,” in other words, to boost corporate profits. In October, his government was scrambling to increase coal production by any means, to avert a looming power generation shortage. Plans are also underway to significantly expand the country’s coal extraction capacity. Indian capitalism is looking at an exponential future growth of fossil fuel use, not a reduction!

India’s capital Delhi descended into yet another horrific episode of air pollution this month, demonstrating what the future holds for the South Asian masses if the current destruction of the atmosphere continues. The Air Quality Index (a combined measure of key pollutants) reached 499 on a scale of 500. Five major coal power plants around the city had to be shut down to prevent a further deterioration, and the Commission of Air Quality Management ordered schools to be closed indefinitely.

Although winter air pollution in Delhi was conveniently attributed, in the past, to post-harvest crop residue burning by poor farmers in the hinterlands, it is now evident that the real culprits are the power sector, major industries and traffic. Apart from the tiny minority of ultra-rich, who can afford to have air purifiers at their offices and homes, more than 20 million residents of Delhi are being forced to breathe toxic fumes for weeks to come.

Speeches by other South Asian leaders to COP26 were similarly bogus. Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse falsely promised that the island-nation would reach net zero by 2050 and said that Colombo would

increase its renewable energy component of the national energy mix to 70 percent by 2030.

Rajapakse even claimed that his government’s disastrous agro-chemical ban would help curb carbon emissions. In fact, Colombo’s import ban on agro-chemicals, which is a desperate attempt to control the country’s massive balance of payments deficit, has devastated small farmers and posed an unprecedented threat to food security. Instead of decreasing, this will increase Sri Lanka’s contribution to carbon emissions exponentially, due to greater food imports and the rural to urban migration of affected farmers.

Both Rajapakse and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina used COP26 to appeal for financial support and investment for climate mitigation and adaptation projects.

Confronting the worst economic crises since the end of British colonial rule, the ruling classes in South Asia see investment in renewable energy projects, and climate adaptation measures, not as essential steps to save the planet’s ecosystem but as financial lifelines for their failing business interests.

In the insane logic of capitalism, any misery of the masses can be turned into a profitable undertaking for the bourgeoisie.

According to the predictions of climate scientists, South Asia is one of the most climate vulnerable regions in the world. Millions will soon lose their land and livelihoods as sea levels rise, while hundreds of thousands more will face death and destitution due to extreme weather events.

Reversal of the imminent global calamity posed by climate change requires revolutionary changes in industry, transport, agriculture and human consumption patterns. Such changes are not possible without a revolutionary social and economic reorganisation, which eliminates the capitalist profit system, with all strategic production and natural resources placed under the democratic and scientific control of the working class.



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