

COP28 climate summit exposes the dead end of fighting climate change under capitalism

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14 December 2023

The 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28), the formal name of yet another global meeting of capitalist governments on climate change, ended Tuesday after reaching what the participants hailed as a “historic” and “landmark” agreement. In reality, the summit has done nothing to address the urgent necessity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat the many problems caused by the ongoing and accelerating climate crisis.

The most highlighted bit of language from the draft resolution of the UN’s annual climate summit is a call for every government to begin a process of “transitioning away from fossil fuels” to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The claim is that this framework will prevent a rise in the global average temperatures of 1.5 degrees Celsius, or at least bring temperatures back under that level if they exceed it for a period of time.

What the draft resolution actually does is allow every capitalist government to posture as fighters against climate change, while simultaneously letting them continue to produce and use fossil fuels in whatever manner they please.

Consider some of the other points of the document, ostensibly included to show the extent to which the world’s industrial capacity needs to be reorganized to address the crisis. These include:

- Accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power
- Accelerating zero- and low-emission technologies
- Accelerating and substantially reducing non-carbon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030

Even the bourgeois media has been forced to question what “accelerating” towards these goals means. What metrics are to be used to determine if efforts are being

successful? How are “unabated” and “substantially” defined?

Furthermore, there is no mechanism for enforcing any of these goals. The resolution itself only “calls on Parties to contribute to the following global efforts, in a nationally determined manner, taking into account the Paris Agreement and their different national circumstances, pathways and approaches.” In other words, each nation can do whatever it wants.

To be clear, such language is a feature, not a bug, for the capitalists. They are all aware, privately if not publicly, of the dangers posed by climate change. Soaring global temperatures, extreme weather events, melting glaciers and ice caps, deteriorating rain forests and coral reefs all pose immense dangers for the continued existence of human civilization.

In the end, however, addressing these concerns would require a vast investment in resources with no immediate payouts and dividends. It is estimated that dealing with climate change will cost \$100 billion a year for the foreseeable future to fund the necessary solutions to deal with the crisis, to re-architect the world’s energy, logistics, and agricultural industries, help workers and rural masses deal with the impacts of climate change and develop new technologies, to name just a few. But such measures impinge on the continued accumulation of private profits, to which the world’s governments are all oriented.

Moreover, while the \$100 billion a year is virtually pocket change compared to the wealth of the bourgeoisie, each nation-state seeks to push its costs onto its rivals, in a conflict which renders any internationally coordinated response to this global danger impossible.

The intervention of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) near the end of COP28

serves as an example. In leaked letters from OPEC to its representatives at the conference, it warned with “utmost urgency” that they must “proactively reject any text or formula that targets energy, i.e., fossil fuels, rather than emissions.” The letters further claimed that such efforts “put our people’s prosperity and future at risk.”

The real concern is that the price of crude oil will be driven further down as a result of the summit. The current price stands at about \$70 per barrel, down from a peak of \$90 per barrel in September and well below the \$100 per barrel that had been predicted earlier this year.

COP28 was also marked by a significant increase in the lobbying for fossil fuels at the event. The summit itself was held in the United Arab Emirates, an OPEC member, and presided over by Sultan Al Jaber, the CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). In the lead-up to the conference, several leaked documents showed he was personally preparing to make new fossil fuel deals for ADNOC with at least 12 countries to the tune of billions of dollars.

Al Jaber was in good company. The environmental group Kick Big Polluters Out estimated that there were at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists at COP28, more than every national delegation except for those from the UAE and Brazil. These include representatives from Shell, TotalEnergies and Equinor, BP, Eni S.p.A. and ExxonMobil, all of which are some of the largest fossil fuel producing corporations in the world.

The contempt by world leaders of the need to fight climate change was further expressed when Graham Stuart, Britain’s minister of state for climate change, left the conference to take part in the vote to deport refugees in the UK to Rwanda. The legislation, which passed, was forced through to overcome objections from the British Supreme Court, which last month ruled that sending refugees to Rwanda was illegal under both British and international law.

One of the reasons for the court’s ruling came from a report from the UK foreign office noting that Rwanda was unsafe for refugees, in part because the country is very vulnerable to climate change, including reduced agricultural output, increased vector-borne diseases such as malaria and several other dangers as a result of increasing temperatures.

The end of COP28 was also applauded by John

Kerry, the US special presidential envoy for climate. Kerry said of the draft resolution, “While nobody here will see their views completely reflected, the fact is that this document sends a very strong signal to the world.”

That signal is that capitalist governments can and will do nothing to fight climate change. Any genuine mobilization would cut across their national interests and corporate profits. It is significant that while most other heads of state attended at least part of the conference, US President Joe Biden did not, ostensibly too busy prosecuting war in Ukraine and genocide in Gaza.

The attitudes of Biden, Al Jaber and Stuart toward the summit are a distillation of the real orientation of capitalist governments towards climate change: To the extent that they notice the problem, it is because of the impact on profits, including the potential for profits from “green” industries.

The active indifference toward global warming makes clear that there can be no appeal to these forces to resolve the crisis. Current greenhouse gas emissions are putting Earth on track for a 3-degree Celsius warming, twice as much as the current benchmark presented as a “point of no return.” In such a scenario, an estimated one billion people would be forced from their homes as a result of sea level rise, on top of the billion now who are currently under threat from dying as a result of starvation, disease and thirst.

A turn must be made to the workers to fight climate change. Like wars, poverty and pandemics, there is no national solution to the problem and thus the solution can only be found through an international social force. The only such force that exists is the working class, which is both an international class and one directly opposed to the continued existence of capitalism. If global warming is to be brought under control, its root cause capitalism must be eradicated and replaced through revolutionary struggle with socialism.



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