A scientific response to climate change is incompatible with capitalism

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The collapse of the COP31 climate summit in Antalya, Türkiye on Sunday, which ended without the governments agreeing on the minimum of a token final statement, marks the end of even the semblance of a globally coordinated response to the accelerating crisis of climate change. It is an expression of the more fundamental fact that a scientific response to climate change is incompatible with the nation-state system and the subordination of all of society to the interests of the capitalist oligarchy.

The talks broke down over whether the final declaration would include the words "fossil fuels." A bloc of countries led by Saudi Arabia, Russia and India demanded that the two words be removed from an earlier draft. Saudi Arabia demanded that the focus shift from mitigating greenhouse gas emissions to "concrete solutions" around carbon capture technologies that serve "national circumstances."

Also on Sunday, the Copernicus Climate Change Service recorded its highest ever temperature anomaly, 2.23 degrees Celsius (4.01 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. This is an individual surge, not a global average temperature increase. That increase currently sits at 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees Fahrenheit) above temperatures of the 19th century.

No doubt none of the participants at the summit appreciated the irony that the global temperature reached a new record the same day that the cause of global warming was being disputed and denied by leading greenhouse gas emitters. But as UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the delegates in the aftermath, "There is no ambiguity in the science."

It has been known since the work of Svante Arrhenius in 1896 that Earth's global average surface temperature is directly connected to the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. And every record of both surface and oceanic temperatures has shown an increase for more than a century, one which has sharply accelerated in the past 40 years.

The overwhelming body of peer-reviewed research by climate scientists the world over, summarized in the assessments of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, concludes that Earth's rising temperatures are human-induced.

Lenin once remarked, "There is a well-known saying that if geometrical axioms affected human interests attempts would certainly be made to refute them." The inability of the parties present at COP31 to name "fossil fuels" in the final report is not just a denial of this science. It speaks to the fact that the capitalist oligarchy can no longer tolerate even the pretense of attempting to resolve the climate crisis because that threatens to impinge on their private profits.

The opposition to science is not confined to Saudi Arabia, Russia and India. The European Union, while participating in an opposing bloc that wanted the references to fossil fuels included, fought against an African proposal for triple funding to help the world's population adapt to the increasingly often deadly impacts of climate change.

The most powerful imperialist country in the world did not even attend. The United States, historically the largest emitter of greenhouse gases and today the second largest, stayed away for the second year in a row. In January, Trump withdrew the US from the UN climate convention itself, the 1992 treaty under which the summits are held and from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the body that assesses climate science for the world's governments.

On November 19, as negotiators in Antalya were stripping the words "fossil fuels" from the draft declaration, Trump met Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Shenzhen. The three issued a joint statement declaring that they "plan to increase the production and supply of refined petroleum products for the benefit of all nations." Russia and China joined Washington in pledging to expand fossil fuel production.

Trump, with his repeated attacks on climate science as a hoax and a scam, is not an aberration. For three decades, the American ruling class and both of its parties have blocked any binding international agreement. On July 25, 1997, months before the Kyoto Protocol was signed, the Senate voted 95-0 for a resolution, sponsored by the Democrat Robert Byrd, opposing any climate treaty that would harm

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the US economy or exempt developing countries. The United States never ratified Kyoto.

At Copenhagen in 2009, the last summit to collapse, Barack Obama negotiated a separate accord with China, India, Brazil and South Africa that bound no one and that the conference merely took note of. In 2024, Joe Biden imposed a 100 percent tariff on Chinese electric vehicles and doubled the tariff on Chinese solar cells to 50 percent, declaring, "we're not going to let China flood our market."

The collapse in Antalya expresses the basic inability to address climate change within the framework of competing capitalist nation-states. The problem is global: a ton of carbon dioxide emitted anywhere inevitably warms the entire planet. But each government acts to defend the profits and strategic position of its own ruling class against its rivals.

"National security" comes first. In 1997, the United States won an exemption for military emissions from the Kyoto Protocol. US negotiator Stuart Eizenstat boasted, "We achieved everything [the Department of Defense] outlined as necessary to protect military operations and our national security."

Today the imperialist powers are engaged in an escalating global war: the US-Israeli war against Iran, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for war against China. In such a war, oil, gas and the routes that carry them are strategic assets, and every other consideration is subordinated to securing them.

In fact, the only projected decline in global emissions since the pandemic year of 2020 has come as a byproduct of this war. The Global Carbon Project projects fossil CO2 emissions to fall about 0.4 percent in 2026, to 38.2 billion tonnes. It attributes this largely to a 1.9 percent drop in oil emissions caused by the Iran war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

The one "reduction" in years was produced not by scientific planning but by a war that is burning tankers in the Gulf. In 1914, in the preface to *War and the International*, Trotsky wrote, "The forces of production which capitalism has evolved have outgrown the limits of nation and state." The world war then raging, he explained, was "at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state." The climate crisis is an expression of the same contradiction.

Behind the governments stands the financial oligarchy. The 65 largest banks committed $706.5 billion to fossil fuel companies in 2023, $869 billion in 2024 and $906 billion in 2025. Since the Paris Accords, the total sum is $7.9 trillion. The UN-backed Net-Zero Banking Alliance, launched in 2021 with pledges from more than 140 banks, voted to shut itself down in October 2025 after a Wall Street exodus. At COP31, 103 polluting corporations and trade associations, 60 of them from the fossil fuel industry, had delegations.

In addition, the International Energy Agency predicts that US investment in fossil fuel power plants will overtake China's in 2026, primarily driven by new gas plants built to power and cool data centers at the core of the artificial intelligence boom. Hyperscaler capital spending is expected to exceed $700 billion in 2026.

Climate change is not the only case where science has been subordinated to private profit. The same process has operated since the onset of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, throughout which the elementary principles of microbiology and public health were thrown out because acting on them impinged on profits. The return of measles in the United States is a further deadly consequence of the full-throated and bipartisan attack on science.

The fundamentally global problem of climate change, however, also points to its solution. A scientific response to the crisis requires a complete reorganization of the world's energy, logistics and agricultural infrastructure on a world scale. The precondition for that is expropriating the energy and finance monopolies to pay for the crisis and abolishing the artificial division of the world into nation states.

The only social force that can carry out such a program is the international working class. The strikes and protests happening now across Europe by workers and youth against being forced to pay for rearmament are also raising the questions of austerity, dictatorship and the climate.

As such, the solution to climate change is not ultimately a scientific or technical, but a social and political one. Just as the capability exists to provide for a high standard of living for every human on the planet, the technologies and resources exist to scale down carbon emissions and provide relief to the hundreds of millions of people that have been impacted by global warming.

The fight is over which class controls society. Capitalism is driving the world to catastrophe and the solution is a fight for a political program and perspective that abolishes this outmoded form of production and places society on a higher socialist basis.

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