Capitalists, Global Warming, and the Climate Justice Movement: Reflections on COP15

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Retrieved on 7 December 2010 from jamesherod.info

This essay was published in the Anarcho-Syndicalist Review, #54, Summer 2010, pages 23–28. For this internet edition I’ve made a few more (17) changes and additions. I also restored some page numbers in the bibliography, and a few full urls, which had been dropped in the magazine edition to save space. The essay is posted on my web site www.jamesherod.info under Selected Papers 1998 to Present.

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The fifteenth meeting of the Conference of Participants (COP15) in the Kyoto Protocol took place this month in Copenhagen, Denmark from December 7 to 18, 2009. The purpose of the conference was to wrap up more than two years of negotiations by representatives of all the world’s governments to get a legally binding treaty for a new round of reductions in carbon emissions under the U.N.’s Kyoto Protocol to replace the first round which was expiring.

So what happened? The United States sabotaged the negotiations by refusing to agree to any legally binding treaty, by refusing to commit itself to any significant reduction of its own carbon pollution, and by refusing to work through the U.N.’s open and democratic negotiating process, instead maneuvering behind the scenes in secret to strike a deal with a few select countries which was then sprung on the conference at the last minute. Naturally, the negotiations collapsed and the conference ended in failure, except for the United States, which outcome is obviously what it had intended all along. To understand the significance and probable consequences of this event some background will be necessary.

Amidst growing reports from the world’s climatologists of alarming increases in temperatures worldwide due to increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, a treaty
was fashioned at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. To date, 192 nations have signed the treaty. The United States tried to obstruct this summit from its outset. The original draft of the treaty had to be greatly weakened and watered down before the United States would agree to sign on.

The same thing happened five years later in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997, where an addition to the Rio treaty was being negotiated to put some teeth into it through legally binding cuts in carbon emissions. Once again the United States was obstructive, refusing to cooperate, unless reductions in carbon emissions were handled through the market (the so-called “Cap and Trade, with Offsets”). Al Gore flew to Kyoto to negotiate this demand. The world finally agreed, just in order to get some treaty, but then the U.S. never ratified the Kyoto Protocol anyway.

Gore’s presence at this crucial conference is significant. He had been for some time closely involved with Wall Street’s efforts to create a market for carbon trading. In a brilliantly researched essay ¹ David Noble persuasively argues that there had been a split in the capitalist ruling class with regard to global warming. Its original response (and its propaganda) was to deny it. But then the financial elite realized that a lot of money could be made if carbon emissions could be commoditized and traded on the market. They launched a massive propaganda campaign to convince the world that global warming was real, that it was being caused by humans (by burning fossil fuels), and that capitalists could solve the problem through


Gelbspan, Ross, Boiling Point: How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists, and Activists are Fueling the Climate Crisis — and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster. New York: Basic Books, 2004, 254 pages.
Hansen, James, Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009, 304 pages.
in Bolivia last April. We all must do everything in our power to strengthen and build this movement. It is our only hope.

Recommended Essays


COP15 Zine Crew, Dealing with Distractions: Confronting Green Capitalism in Copenhagen and Beyond (various authors), 2009, 32 pages, posted on Anarchist Library, theanarchistlibrary.org.


Gelderloos, Peter, “Before the Big Change,” 2009, posted on Anarchist Library, at: theanarchistlibrary.org


A Short Bibliography

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2See for example Tamra Gilbertson and Oscar Reyes, Carbon Trading: How It Works and Why It Fails (Critical Currents, No. 7, November 2009). There is a rare (on the left) dissenting view about “Cap and Trade” by the well-known radical scholar Robin Hahnel. He believes that Cap and Trade could work if a few changes were made in the system, and he believes the left should support this because whether we like it or not the world is presently organized through the market and is likely to remain so for some time. So this is our best chance to get carbon emissions reduced, he argues. See his three part-essay on “The Left and Climate Change” posted on Znet on December 24–26, 2009 at: www.zcommunications.org

By the way, there is a competing mainstream proposal to Cap and Trade, namely, Fee and Dividend. This proposal is supported by James Hansen, one of the first scientists to raise the alarm about global warming. He is the director of NASA’s Goddard Institute of Space Studies. For a description of the proposal see James Hansen, “Cap and Fade,” at: www.commondreams.org.
trapped in nodules deep in the oceans, the loss of the oceans as a carbon sink as they become acidified, and the loss of reflected heat with the melting of the polar ice caps, glaciers, and Greenland’s ice. The earth will become unrecognizable, and all life on it will be threatened.

What are the chances that the United States will change its policy anytime soon, in time to help stave off the tipping point? Virtually zero. Corporate control, especially by Wall Street and Big Oil, over the United States government is now nearly total, and is irreversible within existing institutional structures. The 40-year-old counter-revolution by neoconservative free market ideologues to make sure that corporate control was never threatened again, as it had been in the sixties, has been completely successful. It would take a revolution to reverse this, and there is no sign anywhere of that happening, certainly not in time.

Perhaps the other 191 nations in the treaty could just go ahead without the United States? Perhaps. But they could have (and should have) done that in Rio in 1992. Why didn’t they? Why was the treaty watered down to accommodate the United States? They certainly should have gone ahead without the U.S. in Kyoto. Why did they cave in to U.S. demands for “Cap and Trade”? They most certainly should have done so this month in Copenhagen. But they didn’t. They allowed one country, the United States, to sabotage the treaty, both procedurally and substantively. Whether the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will survive at all is doubtful.

Well, aside from the fact that the United States is the biggest polluter in the world, and even though its empire is rapidly fading, it is still an enormously powerful nation. If a country is not its ally, it is most likely its enemy, and it can be utterly smashed, as has been demonstrated repeatedly in recent years in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somali, and (coming soon) Yemen.
At this point a conceptual clarification is necessary in order to grasp the scope of the problem and to begin to perceive the necessary solution. Capitalism is the name for an entire social order. It is not just an “economy.” Thus, the international nation-state system is an integral part of capitalism, and has been from the very beginning. Capitalists took over the pre-existing state forms and turned them to their own ends, integrating them into their project of accumulating capital. The ability to make profit from privately owned productive properties would be impossible without the legal framework provided by governments, backed by police and military violence. Businesses and governments are in bed together, and have been for the past five hundred years (profit takers + politicians = capitalism). Yet even when a few climate justice activists do admit that capitalism has to be destroyed in order to stop global warming, they fail to note that states do too. Except for anarchists.

Global warming, after all, is merely the end result of centuries of environmental ravaging by capitalists. They have been destroying the environment from their earliest days as the world’s most powerful ruling class. Earlier civilizations did too, but not on such a scale, nor with such relentlessness, nor with a logic internal to their social system, nor with powerful industrial technology, nor were they global civilizations. Capitalists can’t make profit without externalizing the environmental costs. It is foolish therefore to think that global warming can be stopped within a capitalist framework.

Once the true root cause of the climate crisis has been identified — the entire global social order known as capitalism — it is not difficult to map out the long-term solution. An entirely new civilization must be built. This will be a decentralized world without borders, without states, with production for use not profit, based on cooperation and mutual aid, without wage-slavery, money, markets, or hierarchy, a self-governing global social order based on direct democracy. There is a very rich tradition of social philosophy — namely, anarchism (especially...
if it only wanted to, outlaw fossil fuels and enforce this law with its police and armies. There is no need to try to reduce carbon emissions through the market. They could simply be banned. This would be suicide for the capitalist class, however, of which national elites are a part, so it is never done.

Can global warming be stopped on the local level? No it can not. Tens of thousands of towns and cities could do everything in their power to reduce their carbon footprints and it would not make much difference as long as the great engines of capitalist industry, agriculture, transportation, government, and military are still running.

Capitalists have caused global warming. It is true that initially, and for a long time thereafter, capitalists didn’t know that they were doing this, but they could damn well see that they were destroying the environment, and they didn’t care, and still don’t, any more than they cared about the millions of people they were killing, and still are. Capitalists are not going to stop global warming. They are still, and always will be, bickering and jockeying and fighting amongst themselves for position, power, markets, resources, and profits. That’s what they mostly do at these conferences. (Plus, thousands of corporate lobbyists descended on Copenhagen, flushed with cash, to add to the chaotic drama.)

We might have survived peak oil and the gradual disappearance of cheap fossil fuel energy. (Too bad peak oil didn’t happen a couple of decades earlier.) That crisis would have been spread over several decades at least. We might have had as much as 50 years to make the transition to a less energy-intensive way of life (seeing that no combination of known alternative energy sources can even begin to replace the energy we have been getting from fossil fuels). We would at least have couldn’t, actually (and remain capitalists, that is), because there is no profit to be made from dismantling all this infrastructure.

It’s true that a small minority of capitalists are trying to make profit off global warming. They are building vast wind and solar installations, inventing hydrogen powered cars, converting millions of acres of farm land to the production of biomass, trying to create a market for carbon trading, and starting to build vast new power grids. When corporations and governments do get involved in trying to stop global warming, this is the direction they go in. They try to solve the crisis within the framework of capitalism. Even many of the most outspoken climate activists do this; that is, they are not anti-capitalist — James Hansen, George Monbiot, Bill McKibben, Al Gore, or Ross Gelbspan. Those few climate theorists who are anti-capitalist, mostly from a Marxist perspective, nevertheless think that the crisis can be solved with the aid of governments — Joel Kovel, John Bellamy Foster, Charles Derber. That is, they are anti-capitalist, but not anti-state. This is just to say that an anarchist perspective on the crisis is hardly in the discussion at all (but see Recommended Essays below).

At least one head of state, Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, has clearly identified capitalism as the enemy, when he said “Either capitalism dies or Mother Earth dies.” But as the head of a government he naturally doesn’t think of attacking the state too, or representative government per se. According to one participant in April’s climate justice conference in Tiquipaya, Bolivia, many of those attending (roughly 30,000 from 140 countries, with 40 governmental delegations) were anti-capitalists, but few were anti-state. Besides, Evo Morales is merely president of one of the poorest nations on earth. How much power does he have? Where are the voices of the great European labor unions, the big UN agencies like the World Health Organization or the Food and Agriculture Organization, the global NGOs, the leaders of the world’s Social Democratic parties?

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exploit, on a massive scale, all alternative sources of energy for
the generation of electricity — wind, solar, geothermal, tides,
heat pumps — and do this without building more dams or nu-
clear power plants. Such an international crash program does
not seem in the cards at all. In fact, the opposite is happening.
At least three dozen countries are in the process of building
more coal-fired power plants.

The task of getting off all fossil fuels is even more daunting.
It would require, in addition to clean electricity, massive en-
ergy conservation programs, abandonment of industrial agri-
culture in favor of sustainable organic farming, retro-fitting the
world’s cars and trucks for hydrogen or electricity and a drastic
reduction in their number, massive investment in high speed
electric trains and other public transportation, severe curtail-
ment of flying, resettlement of the countryside, stopping the
destruction of forests, drastic reduction of energy use almost
across the board, putting an end to waste and shoddy prod-
ucts, abandonment of unnecessary or frivolous industry, dis-
mantling the world’s military machines (which are among the
greatest consumers of oil, especially the Pentagon), abolition
of stock markets, defeat of the mammoth oil companies, and
so forth.

Just to list these minimum required changes exposes how
utterly incompatible they are with capitalism, for those who
are even aware of capitalism, that is, and understand how it
works. Capitalists have caused these human-made material re-
alities we are living with — the 438 nuclear power plants with
61 more under construction (as of 2010), the roughly 800 mil-
lion passenger cars and light trucks on the road (in 2007), the
megacities (20 of them with a population of over 10 million
each, another 26 with a population of over 5 million each),
the fleets of jet planes, oil tankers, agribusiness, skyscrapers,
industry, tourism, the huge government bureaucracies, mas-
sive dams, and so forth. Are capitalists likely to do an about
face now and start to dismantle all this. No they’re not. They
had a bit more time to try once again to get capitalists out of
the picture, so that humanity could work together to build a
new civilization, something that is impossible to do as long as
capitalists control the world. There would even have been an
outside chance that it could have been a sustainable, decentral-
ized, democratic, and just social order that we created.

But this new crisis, this imminent “tipping point” for global
warming, is another beast altogether. It is happening too fast.
How can we possibly dismantle in just a decade or two the vast
infrastructures capitalists have built — the billions of people
living in crowded metropolises, having been driven off their
lands and separated from their peasant farming and now totally
dependent on agribusiness for their food and on oil and gas for
heat and transportation?

In retrospect, it appears that our fate was sealed when our
massive communist, socialist, and anarchist movements, which
mobilized tens of millions of people, failed throughout the
twentieth century to defeat capitalists. Now it seems that we
may not get another chance.

Can the climate justice movement stop global warming? No
it can not. To do that it would have to be able to destroy cap-
italism. This objective, however, is hardly even on the agenda
for most climate activists, and if it were they wouldn’t have
an inkling about a strategy for doing so. Hardly anyone does
nowadays. If a movement can’t even identify the root cause of
a problem, how can it possibly solve it?

It was sweet, it’s true, that climate justice activists made such
an impressive showing in Copenhagen. They put 100,000 peo-
ple in the streets. They came from all over the world. They or-
ganized an alternative conference, the KlimaForum. They tried
to make their voices heard. But they were viciously repressed,
and, in the end, actually locked out of the conference hall.

There were dozens of groups and organizations involved,
among which were: Climate Justice Action, Greenpeace In-
ternational, Rising Tide International, Carbon Trade Watch,
Camp for Climate Action, Friends of the Earth International, Mobilization for Climate Justice, 350.org, Rainforest Action Network, and Climate Crisis Coalition. There are hundreds of NGOs worldwide working on this issue.

Nevertheless, this movement is very short on money and power, and it is not massive (although it likes to pretend that it is). Its protests have no punch, as was noted by Naomi Klein when she said in Copenhagen: “They’re laughing at us.” There is not much muscle here to be coming up against a rich, deeply entrenched, historically seasoned, and powerful world ruling class. The slogans are nice: “Our Climate is Not Your Business,” “Change Trade, Not the Climate,” “There is No Planet B,” “Bla Bla Bla, Act Now,” “Nature Doesn’t Compromise,” and so forth. But can they ever be more than just chants? I think not.

So what are our prospects? Realistically speaking, we are fucked. Ten, fifteen, or twenty years will go by in a flash. Business as usual will prevail. The oil, gas, and coal companies will not be reigned in. The lumber companies that are cutting down the rainforests for profit will not be stopped. Corporate-controlled governments will not take action. The sheer inertia of a worldwide capitalist civilization built on cheap fossil fuel energy will keep the vast machine grinding inexorably on until the tipping point is reached, after which the irreversible warming of the earth will begin in earnest from natural causes. That will be the end of the line for us.

Further Reflections on Stopping Global Warming

In my continuing study and deliberation about global warming during the five months since the above was written, I’ve mostly been trying to find a little wiggle room, a way out of the dire prognosis laid out in that report on COP 15. Is our situation really as bad as I claimed?

Historically (1751–2008), Europe is seen to be an even worse polluter with 37.9% of cumulative emissions to the U.S.’s 27.2%, and China’s 9.1%. These facts suggest a point of attack, and James Hansen has been focusing on it for some time: coal. If the world would stop burning coal to generate electricity this alone would significantly reduce carbon emissions, perhaps enough so to slow global warming a bit to give us more time to get off fossil fuels altogether. We can narrow it down even further. If only the United States (with 614 coal-fired power plants, out of 2300 world wide) and China (with 620 coal-fired power plants, with about 500 more due to come on-line in the near future) would stop burning coal this would be a big step toward reducing CO2 emissions. But how likely is it that these two nations, each with a rapacious and savage capitalist ruling class, can be pressured to do so? Not very damn likely, I’d say.

No, global warming is a global problem and requires a global solution. Even if the USA, Europe, and China, which together produce 60% of the world’s total, all reduced their CO2 emissions to zero, that would still leave the 40% being produced by the rest of the world. That 40% might be enough to push us over the tipping points.

It seems unlikely also that coal could be separated out like this from the rest of the problem. If a global campaign could be organized and implemented to phase out coal why not also work to get off fossil fuels in general at the same time. That would make more sense. But just to replace all coal-fired power plants in the world would in itself take a stupendous amount of capital, involvement of all major governments, and agreement by a sizable chunk of the corporate and financial elite. There would have to be a world-wide coordinated effort to rapidly

11From two diagrams on page 189, James Hansen, Storms of My Grandchildren.
12See, for example, James Hansen, “Coal-fired power stations are death factories. Close them.” The Observer, Sunday, February 15, 2009.
rotting vegetation; and 2.8% from other sources. Other major greenhouse gases are methane at 14.3%, and nitrous oxide at 7.9%.  

So this is why the focus has been on reducing CO2. Most of the CO2 from burning fossil fuels comes from burning coal to generate electricity. Forty-one percent of electricity worldwide is generated from burning coal (gas 20%, hydro 16%, nuclear 15%, oil 6%, renewables 2%). Being new to the issue I found this surprising. I had assumed that most emissions came from burning oil (gasoline, diesel, kerosene) in cars, trucks, and planes. Actually, transportation accounts for about half as many emissions as coal-fired power plants.

The breakdown of carbon dioxide emissions by sector of the economy is as follows, in descending order of size: energy supply 25.9%, industry 19.4%, forestry 17.4%, agriculture 13.5%, transportation 13.1%, residential and commercial buildings 7.9%, and waste and wastewater 2.8%. So all the stress being put on greening residential and commercial buildings while ignoring electricity generation, industry, and agriculture is seriously misguided.

Where, geographically, do CO2 emissions come from? Again, there is a surprise, since everyone says that the United States is the worst polluter. This is not true if Europe is taken as a whole (and after all they’ve been toting their European Union for some time now), and if we include Russia as part of Europe as it rightfully should be. Thus in 2008 China produced 22.1% of CO2 emissions, with Europe at 20.7%, the United States at 17.9%, and the rest of the world at 39.3% (India 3.5%, Japan 3.5%).

The first thing I re-examined was the timelines on tipping points. How firm are they? Well, there are several tipping points each with an independent timeline, but which nevertheless more or less converge. Here are the major ones: (1) Death or destruction of rainforests; (2) Ocean acidification; (3) Melting of snow and ice (glaciers, ice caps on Greenland and the Antarctic, sea ice on the Arctic Ocean); (4) Ocean warming; (5) Thawing of frozen tundra across Siberia and northern Canada.

Let’s take a look at these. Some scientists are now claiming that the rainforests are already at the upper limit of their tolerance for temperature increases. With further warming they might simply die, scientists say. In terms of loss of biodiversity this would be a colossal tragedy, but a tragedy also for global warming, because rainforests are a major carbon sink. They take CO2 out of the air. If they die, they will start adding CO2 to the atmosphere with the burning or rotting of dead trees and vegetation. Even if rainforests don’t die, transnational lumber companies are cutting them down at a rapid clip, with the con-

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sent of national governments. We can’t put a precise date on when they will be gone. It is not unreasonable, however, to say that if the present rate of deforestation continues, they will be gone in 20 to 30 years.\(^5\)

The oceans are also a carbon sink, but they are becoming less so as they acidify by absorbing some of the excess CO2 in the atmosphere. Ocean acidification is already quite alarming. It’s hard to say exactly when the oceans will stop absorbing CO2, but 20–30 years is not an unreasonable estimate.

The most imminent and very visible tipping point is the melting of the earth’s snow and ice. This will significantly decrease the amount of sunlight being reflected back into space. Instead, the energy will stay on the earth heating up the oceans, soil, and atmosphere. Glaciers the world over are rapidly melting. The sea ice covering the Arctic Ocean is melting. The ice caps on the Antarctic and Greenland are melting. It is now believed that Greenland’s ice sheet could disintegrate rapidly, in just a few decades, rather than in the century or more indicated by previous estimates.

Global warming will bring and is bringing with it drastic changes and hardships, like more severe weather, desertification, and rising sea levels. For the latter, for example, if all the snow and ice on earth melts, the sea level will rise by 250 feet. This will cause almost unimaginable suffering, destruction, and death, but is not in itself earth killing. What I want to hone in on here are the tipping points that will kill all life on earth.

It’s clear what they are: warming of the oceans, and thawing of the frozen tundra stretching across Siberia and northern Canada. Why? Because this warming will release billions of tons of methane gas trapped in the northern permafrost and in frozen nodules in the oceans (methane hydrates). (And methane is a more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.) Once this process is fully underway it becomes self-perpetuating and is irreversible. There are no natural processes that could remove the gas from the atmosphere fast enough. The atmosphere will become poisonous. The earth will get very hot. All life will die. The earth will become like Venus.\(^6\)

This is what we must fear. If carbon dioxide emissions are not stopped, the earth will continue to heat up. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is continuing to increase by 2 ppm (parts per million) per year. Thus in 20 years another 40 ppm will be added to the existing 385 ppm, which is already 35 ppm over the 350 ppm which is considered the maximum permissible for a stable climate. (The pre-industrial level was 280 ppm in 1750.) 425 ppm CO2 might be enough to raise the earth’s temperature another two degrees. So these last two tipping points could well be passed in twenty years, thirty at the most.\(^7\) These dates are not absolutely firm, but seeing that all life on earth is at stake, we dare not gamble that we have more time. The permafrost has already started to thaw, releasing gas, and methane has already been observed bubbling up in the Arctic Ocean and elsewhere. Stopping this is our most urgent task.

Before returning to the question of whether or how global warming can be stopped, let me set the scene a little more clearly with some pertinent facts. As most everyone now knows, carbon dioxide is the most important greenhouse gas, comprising 76.7% of the total. Of this, 56.6% comes from burning fossil fuels; another 17.3% comes from deforestation and

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\(^6\) For the December essay I had picked up the year 2020 from various reports and target dates circulating at Copenhagen. Upon further study, however, I think that ten years is too early to expect tipping points to be passed. We have a little more time than that, but not much, 20–30 years.

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\(^7\) The top ten countries with the largest net loss of forests, 2000–2005, measured in acres of forest lost per year, are Brazil 7,667,689; Indonesia 4,623,322; Myanmar 1,151,506; Sudan 1,455,445; Zambia 1,099,614; Tanzania 1,018,070; Nigeria 1,013,127; Congo 788,263; Zimbabwe 773,436. See page 174 in Al Gore, *Our Choice.* Source: UN, FAO, *State of the World’s Forests,* 2007.