

COP15: Notes From Below

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November 29, 2009

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This December (ten years since the alter-globalisation movements took to the streets of Seattle to oppose the world trade organization) activists from across the globe will be descending on Copenhagen to protest the COP15 round of discussion. Has the UK Direct Action movement changed in the interceding years between these cycles of struggle? And what lessons, if any, can it learn from its recent past?

What COP15 Is

The fifteenth 'Conference Of Parties' (COP) is scheduled for 7-18th December 2009. Established by the UN, with the first meeting in Berlin in 1995, these conferences aimed to determine the method by which the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) treaty could be pushed forward. This treaty was legally non-binding, but provided protocols with the objective of stabilizing greenhouse gas emissions at a level which would prevent 'man-made' climate change.

The COP talks aim to establish legally binding obligations for developed countries to reduce their emissions whilst not inhibiting the industrialization of developing nations. Through out its brief history the COP process has been hampered by indecision. The most famous example being the Kyoto Protocol. This was proposed at COP3 in 1997 to set emission restrictions for the period 2008–2012. The next nine years and 8 meetings were dominated by attempts to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in the face of severe challenges and finally a firm rejection by the USA. By the time an agreement was met, the time frames set were unworkable and COP shifted their focus towards establishing a successor.

The purpose of COP15 is to establish a decisive global agreement which can pick up the pieces from the Kyoto Protocol when it expires in 2012. This they hope to achieve through various market methods, including the implementation of carbon trading, a means by which developed nations can buy their way out of emissions targets through exchange with less-developed nations which emit far less than the designated targets. In effect, through the supply of funding and 'technology', richer countries can accumulate 'spare' carbon credits and not address their own emissions. The meeting will be attended by Governmental ministers and officials from 192 countries as well as business leaders and civic society groups.

Why Should You Care About COP15?

In the wake of the financial crisis it seems apparent to us that states and the international markets will use the threat of runaway climate change as a means to restructure capital and to shore up state power.

What Do We Mean By This?

That the very industries and national bodies that have created this crisis will make the working and poor population of the world pay for carbon reduction through increased attacks on our collective standards of living and our limited freedom.

It seems likely that these attacks will take the form of green taxes levelled against populations, the control or regulation of people's movements between borders (flight allocation/personal car-

bon rations), rising fuel prices, energy rationing or through the establishment of renewable industries (which will involve layoffs/retraining).

The ‘Radical’ Green Movement, As We See It

From the outside it appears that these concerns for COP15’s outcome seem to be drowned out by the louder voices of the ‘mainstream’ green movement who seek solely to cut carbon emissions by ANY means necessary.

This desire to halt emissions is fuelled by the apocalyptic rallying cry of ‘100 months’. This ‘peer reviewed’ timeframe states that the world has less than 100 months to reduce carbon emissions before runaway climate change leads to catastrophe. This tempo has set the agenda for what is believed possible, with many campaigners claiming that only state-led solutions can be offered in the timeframe posed. The failure of anti-authoritarian movements to organize themselves materially and to challenge state power, has only helped maintain people’s faith in a process that has systematically failed to deliver any agreements over the last 14 years.

Another narrative shared by both the state and the broad green movement is the belief that climate change is a ‘man made’ problem and not one of our economy. This confusion only lends the state more power when offering up its solutions.

While human industry has undoubtedly contributed to climate change to pin this on a ‘neutral humanity’ is to miss the point entirely. Climate change has not been brought about by mankind’s progressive march towards a petroleum-driven technological future, but by capitalism, the means by which our lives are ordered.

Summit Hopping Again?

The activist movements seem awash with an excitement not felt since the heyday of the alter-globalisation movement. In the UK, Climate Camp have called for a national mobilization, similar to Earth First’s mobilization to Prague for the IMF/WB meeting in 2001. Many have projected that climate change will kick start a new cycle of summit struggles, if this is to be the case there seems to be little comparisons or inter-movement dialogue regarding the failures and limited successes of the last cycle.

Uneasy victory?

Anarchist and ultra left groups have often recognized what is at stake at these summits, and as such played an important role in summit mobilizations during the last cycle, especially against economic forums such as the WTO and IMF . These manifestations were able to galvanise activists from diverse backgrounds (environmentalists, faith groups, indigenous peoples through to steel workers) due to the obvious nature of the unelected and unaccountable illegitimacy of the institutions these protests opposed. It can be also argued that the inclusion of just ‘8’ of the worlds leading economies was justification enough for many to mobilise against the predecessor of the G20. Anti-state voices were often in the minority at these mobilizations.

While the legitimacy of such institutions matters little to anarchist groups, COP15 presents itself as a united effort on behalf of ‘world democracy’ (the UN) to reorder itself, and as such,

antagonisms to the process are not as clearly defined by those attending as in previous summit event. Or, to be more precise there is no shared understanding of what is at stake and who or what is to blame. Already there have been calls to both ‘shut them down and keep them in’! from activist networks mobilizing for COP.

This confused position has been seen as a positive representation of the ‘diversity of opinion’ of the groups attending. Regardless of political difference, for all attending be they radical or reformist, carbon reduction remains the priority of the movement. A priority that could lead to strange and uncomfortable ‘victories’ if the governments and business leaders attending COP15 have their way.

From the outside the debate seems solely focused on carbon emission reduction with the occasional nod towards ‘worker’s issues’ in the shape of a ‘just transition to a carbon free future’. Without addressing by whose agency a just transition will be achieved, protests will do little to counter the attempts to restructure labour from above. It could be argued that those attending the COP15 protests could also be seen to be supporting any planned ‘new green deal’, austerity is the only outcome likely in our mind.

We have yet to hear of radical voices inside the green movements that articulate our concerns or address the inadequacy of narrow single issue demands effectively. We hope that those attending the protests take our concerns with them, and articulate them, in order to broaden the debate inside the ‘carbon justice’ movement.

Give Up Activism...

It can now be stated with some certainty that summit hopping of the past failed to generalize itself outside of the activists who attended them. Protests became the increasing expertise of a small class of international activist ‘experts’. We see little to convince us that this trend has changed in the interceding years. In the end the only people who understood the politics of summit mobilisations were not the millions of passive observers the protesters imagined being radicalized by their actions, but the dwindling numbers of participants and the police. If the radical green movement, of which climate camp is a main player, is serious about ‘confronting and reversing the route causes of climate change’ it must broaden itself out to include the concerns of the international working class.

Whilst it is too late to halt the process set in motion by a ‘summit call out’, we hope that all those attending COP15 return to their homes safely and without the necessity to reinvent the wheel- i.e. condemning their generation to another decade of spectacular riots with little or no real material gains.

Instead, we hope they return refreshed and willing to expand the movement at home, wherever that may be, that deal with the root causes of climate change. Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing our species’ continued survival on this planet. Whilst we must strive to halt emissions, this must be contained within the framework of a totalized understanding of the problems we face e.g. capitalism and the State as the motor of climate change. Failure to articulate our demands or to meet other people in contestation with capitalism will condemn the movement to one of radical posturing and isolation, like its ‘anti-globalisation’ predecessor. A posture that will not be noticed from the outside, regardless of how many column inches the Guardian devotes to its unofficial leadership.

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