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Environment

From COP to COP, the cataclysm draws closer

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The 25th Conference of the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP25) is about to start in Madrid. This summit was set to be held in Santiago, but the Chilean president preferred a waiver. COPs often convene 10,000 people: they had to be prevented from witnessing the savage police repression of the uprising against the Piñera government's ultra-liberal policies.

To remind our readers, the United Nations Framework Convention was adopted during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. [1] It set the objective for states to prevent "dangerous anthropogenic interference with the Earth's climate. Follow-up on this commitment was supposed to be ensured by the Conferences of the Parties (COP) which have met yearly since 1995. Thus Madrid will be the 25th.

A negative balance sheet from A to Z

The balance sheet of this process has been negative from A to Z. From COP1 to COP24, governments have above all striven to find ways not to reduce their emissions, or to have others reduce them, or to pretend to reduce them by delocalising them, or to obtain new markets to compensate their pledge to reduce them to a homeopathic dose, or to get the absurd idea that not felling a tree is equivalent to not burning fossil fuels.

The outcome of this posturing is that the annual release of the main greenhouse gas, CO₂ is more than 60% greater than its 1990 level and increasing even more rapidly now than in the 20th century. In consequence, the atmospheric concentration of CO₂, which was 350 ppm in 1990, is 415 ppm now. [2] This level is unprecedented since the Pliocene, 1.8 million years ago. During that era, the sea level was 20 to 30 meters higher than nowadays...

Crime against humankind and nature

The text adopted at Rio failed to define the level of "dangerous anthropogenic interference". This major shortcoming derived from pressure by petroleum, coal and gas multinationals, as well as the many sectors of the capitalist economy that are directly dependent on these sources of fossil fuel (automotive, petrochemical, naval and aeronautic construction, etc.) Faithfully relayed by the states in their service, the major petroleum and coal groups also paid millions of dollars to pseudo-scientists spreading gross climate denial myths among the public.

Since 1992, everything has been implemented, with no holds barred, to exploit fossil reserves for as long as possible and thus avoid bursting the "carbon bubble". Those responsible for such manoeuvres, and their political accomplices, must be taken to court and sentenced for crimes against humankind and against nature.

Maximum 2°C or 1.5°C?

Not until COP21, a quarter-century after Rio, was a decision taken in terms of the heating level that should not be exceeded. The agreement adopted in Paris does stipulate that climate policy has the goal of "maintaining the

temperature increase well below 2Å°C while continuing efforts to not exceed 1.5Å°C”. But this ambiguous text (which is the goal; 2Å°C or 1.5Å°C?) cites no course of action and prescribes no sanction against countries that don't play their part in that effort. It does not even mention fossil fuels, yet these are the main cause of the increase in the greenhouse effect!

The October 2018 IPCC special report leaves no doubt, contrary to what major media and politicians have been claiming for over 20 years now, 2Å°C of heating would be far too dangerous for non-humans and humans. [3] One example among others: the Greenland ice sheet contains enough ice to raise the sea level by 7 meters. Yet, specialists estimate that the point of no return for its breakup is located somewhere between 1.5Å°C and 2Å°C of heating...

The spectre of a “hothouse planet”

There is no freezer where we can put the globe to cool it down. In other words, once triggered, the breakup of Greenland (or of any other ice cap or sheet) will be impossible to stop until a new energy equilibrium of the Earth system is reached. In the meantime, this breakup risks bringing about a sequence of “positive feedbacks” turning Amazonia into a savannah, breaking up the Antarctic's giant glaciers, irreversible permafrost thaw... [4] A gigantic climate domino effect could rapidly lead to a 4 to 5Å°C increase in the average temperature of the Earth's surface.

Specialists fear that this runaway global heating will push the earth outside the relatively stable system in which it has been oscillating for 1.5 million years (alternating glacial and interglacial periods). The earth would then enter a new system, analogous to the Pliocene: the “hothouse planet”. It is impossible to imagine such a momentous change, but one thing is absolutely certain; if our species survives, it will not be with a population of seven or eight billion people, and the poor will certainly be the main victims of the cataclysm – the main “adjustment variable” (the usual refrain). The ghastly inhuman policies towards refugees provide a glimpse of the coming barbarism.

Can we still remain below 1.5Å°C?

At present, global heating stands at approximately 1.1Å°C with respect to the pre-industrial era. At the current rate of emissions, the 1.5Å°C point will be crossed around 2040. Everything must be done to prevent this from happening. But is it still possible? Alas, this is far from certain!

The IPCC 1.C special report proposes four illustrative stabilisation scenarios, under the dangerous threshold (with only one chance for success out of two!) [5] Three of these four scenarios must be rejected. These are based on the absurd concept of a “temporary overshoot of 1.5Å°C” followed by cooling afterwards by using certain technologies.

These so-called “negative emissions” technologies are supposed to remove carbon from the atmosphere. However, if they function (and on an adequate scale!) and also supposing that the carbon withdrawn from the atmosphere can be safely stored where it will not leak out, the situation is so critical that there is a real risk of seeing “temporary overshoot” provoke irreversible accidents. For example, if Greenland's ice cap starts breaking down... leading to a domino effect winding up with a “hothouse planet”. [6]

The fourth scenario would make it possible without “temporary excesses”, thus without negative emissions technologies. It implies a drastic reduction in net world emissions of CO₂: -58% by 2030, -100% by 2050, negative emissions from 2050 to 2100 [7]. This scenario can't be accepted as it is, because, like the others, it implies a strong

development of the nuclear energy share (+50% in 2030, + 150% in 2050, that is around 200 more plants, also entailing a significant increase in the risk of nuclear war). However, we can deduct that the required emissions decline cannot be achieved without a strong decrease in global energy consumption (around 20% by 2030 and 40% in 2050, if not more) and that this decrease is inaccessible without a significant decrease in production and transport. [8].

An emergency plan is urgent

It is too late to avert the catastrophe: it looms before us. The evidence is more intense heat waves, more violent cyclones and typhoons, faster-melting glaciers in Greenland and Antarctica, sea levels rising faster than predicted, more violent storms and precipitation, disturbance of monsoons, murderous forest fires and many other phenomena depicted by the media. To say nothing of the very rapid destruction of biodiversity (caused in part by climate change), nor overlook the other aspects of the “ecological crisis” (such as pollution by synthetic chemical products and radioactive nucleotides).

The most elementary common sense – or, survival instinct ! – would call for the development of a global emergency plan to save the climate and biodiversity in social and climatic justice, as quickly and democratically as possible, thus radically reducing the scandalous social inequalities created by neo-liberalism. Such a plan must socialise the energy and finance sectors (without compensation or buyouts) because it is the only means of unlocking the climate future. It must eliminate all useless or harmful production (weapons, for example!) and all useless transport, as these are the simplest means of drastically and very quickly reducing emissions. This would provide some elbow room to invest in energy efficiency (in particular through building renovation and insulation) and to build a new energy system 100% based on renewable sources.

Paradigm shift: care vs. production, real needs vs. profit

Within the plan, agribusiness, the meat industry, industrial fishery and industrial forestry would be replaced respectively by agro-ecology, small-scale fishing, livestock reared in meadows and ecological forestry. These deep changes, as part of a prospect of food and energy sovereignty, would make it possible to simultaneously reduce emissions substantially, protect biodiversity, improve health and create hundreds of millions of useful, meaningful jobs.

The plan implies a total paradigm shift. Profit must make way for real needs, productivism must give way to care provided to humans and non-humans. This means repairing the damage caused by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. This entails providing the Global South the resources for carbon-free development, to provide all humans social security worthy of this name, to guarantee women equal rights and control over their reproductive systems, and to greatly extend the public, para-public and non-market sectors.

Ensured by the creation of new activities and a very radical reduction in labour time to 15 hours weekly (with no loss in salary and reduction in work rhythms and paces), full employment would become an ecological and social demand. [9] Sharing necessary work is also indispensable so everyone democratically takes part in drawing up and carrying out the plan, as well as domestic tasks.

There is no way out of the system-wide crisis without an anticapitalist alternative. To halt the catastrophe and prevent

the cataclysm, we absolutely must produce less (produce for real needs), transport less (most transport only aim to maximise profits for multinationals) and share more (as a priority, share the wealth and better distribute necessary labour). This ecosocialist perspective is also necessary to emerge from the crisis of civilisation created by capital, as there is no possible freedom in the delusional pursuit of unlimited consumption, based on unlimited exploitation of the Earth and of humans. Consumerism is merely a miserable compensation for a miserable existence.

Nothing to expect from COPs

It goes without saying that this alternative can't emerge from COPs. During these summits, at the very best, governments try to square the circle: avert the cataclysm while ensuring continued capital accumulation and maintaining neoliberal systems (in other words, the system needed for accumulation in a context of declining profit rate and generalised overproduction). This is why, despite protocols, carbon taxes, exchangeable emissions quotas, "clean development", "climate finance", annual COPs and all that song and dance, capitalist accumulation, like a robot, keeps on unperturbed, dragging humankind towards the "hothouse planet."

COP 25 won't turn the trend around. One of the main points under debate concerns the new "market mechanism" foreseen in the Paris agreement (article 6). This mechanism should encompass and extend the – generally bogus – provisions for "carbon compensation" in effect since the Kyoto protocol ("Clean development mechanism" and "Joint implementation", adding the REDD and REDD+ programmes). The unfinished debates about concretising the Paris article 6, at COP24 (Katowice), showed that the stakes are always the same: in practice, one hand cancelling the agreements in principle signed by the other.

Failure of green capitalism, dead end for the system

The media saluted the success of COP21. In truth, the governments failed in terms of the key question that conditions the response to the climate challenge in the market framework: setting a global carbon price. Recovering from this failure won't be easy. Four years after Paris, an IMF publication speaks of this dead end. ". [10] The authors write that climate change could cause "in the extreme, human extinction". ". [IMF WP/19/185, Sept 2019 p11.]]. Unfortunately, they continue, "the important gap between private and social returns on low carbon emissions investments will probably persist in future, as the future paths of carbon taxation and tariffication are very uncertain, in large part for political economy reasons" (sic). This means that not only a market for current climate mitigation is missing because carbon emissions aren't subject to tariffs, but also markets for future mitigation. This is important for the performance of private investments in climate attenuation technologies, infrastructures and capital. Finally, five years after Paris, the crisis of bourgeois democracy based on electoralist demagoguery makes it impossible to look beyond a three-year period.

Here's a translation of this technocratic gibberish: We must act to avert humankind's destruction but it isn't profitable. The gap between the survival of the 99% and the profits of the 1% will "probably persist" because there is no world power capable of imposing a carbon price placing all capitalists on an equal footing in the race for profit. So nothing gets done. We can't imagine a starker illustration of the fact that capitalism has nothing more to offer except destruction and death.

All of this is the outcome of the capitalist system in its terminal phase, which, as Marx said, "exhausts the only two sources of all wealth: the Earth and the worker".

Governments' failure in the face of the ecological crisis, and particularly the climate crisis, is not the outcome of a mysterious fate or the perversity of human nature, but the outcome of five structural factors. Capital's congenital productivism prevents it from producing less; the neoliberal accumulation system prevents creation of a public plan; the contradiction between the internationalisation of capital and the national character of states prevents it from dealing with the overall challenge; the crisis of imperialist leadership prevents ensuring even a modicum of order within capitalist disorder (a factor further aggravated by Donald Trump's climate denial). Finally, the crisis of bourgeois democracy based on electoralist demagoguery makes it impossible to look beyond a three-year period.

End of the world, end of the month, a single ecosocialist struggle

Thinking that a society based on labour exploitation, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, colonial arrogance, violence, abuse of power and growing inequalities can carry on respectful, careful, co-operative, peaceful and prudent relations with (the rest of) nature is absurd. How can we believe that we can avoid inflicting on other living beings what we put up with ourselves? How can we imagine a system that exploits labour power every day would refrain from pillaging other natural resources? How can we expect a society could respect the "services" nature provides it when that society holds the services provided free of charge by the female half of humankind in contempt, within the framework of social reproduction?

We won't fundamentally change relations between humankind and nature without fundamental change in relationships between humans. Taking care of ourselves in a manner worthy of our humanity is a *sine qua non* condition to take care of the world we are a part of.

"End of the world, end of the month: same enemy, same struggle" resounded in rallies that brought together Yellow Vests and climate marchers in France. This slogan expresses the underlying issue: struggles against social and ecological destruction are two aspects of the same ecosocialist struggle. The solution is not putting pressure on the COPs. It means the convergence of the struggles of the exploited and the oppressed for another necessary, possible and desirable world.

PS:

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[1] <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>.

[2] Parts per million (ppm) are a unit of concentration. 350 ppm CO₂ means that, out of a million molecules, 350 are CO₂ molecules. During the 800,000 years before the 20th century, the CO₂ concentration fluctuated between 220 and 280 ppm.

[3] https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf.

[4] The Thwaites and Totten glaciers (West Antarctica and East Antarctica respectively) contain enough water to raise sea levels by about 7.5m.

[5] <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/>.

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[6] The most developed of the negative emission technologies is bioenergy with carbon capture and sequestration. Removing less than 10% of annual CO₂ emissions in this way would require spending about 20% of the agricultural area on biomass cultivation....

[7] To respect "differentiated responsibilities" between North and South, 58% global reduction means reductions of around 65% in the "developed" countries.

[8] For energy consumption, the IPCC cites figures of -15% in 2030 and -32% in 2050. These are underestimated because they are based on the assumption that nuclear power will increase significantly in the "energy mix" (+59% in 2030, +150% in 2050 - i. e. about 200 additional power plants). If we exclude nuclear energy (and we must exclude it!), the reduction in world energy consumption should rather be in the order of 20% in 2030 and 40% in 2050. In any case, such a reduction requires a substantial reduction in production and transport.

[9] All other things being equal, the maximum number of hours of employment compatible with the residual carbon budget would be 16 hours/week in OECD countries (for a carbon budget of 2Å°C). Philipp Frey, "The ecological limits of work", *Autonomy*, April 2019.

[10] IMF WP/19/185, Sept 2019 <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications...>