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Environment

Official: Capitalism is killing our planet!

- IV Online magazine - 2007 - IV386 - February 2007 -

Publication date: Friday 23 February 2007

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The report of UN's International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on global warming recently published in Paris has changed the terms of the debate on this issue. It is the most extensive study to date and is the first a series of reports to be published this year. Previous IPCC reports (this is the fourth such report) have provided the `official' benchmark for the debates on global warming and climate change.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/warming.jpg>]

The conclusion of this latest report is that global warming will have a far more destructive impact than the IPCC had previously predicted and that it will come in a shorter period of time. The evidence for global warming, it says, is now "unequivocal" and is "almost certainly" [i.e. greater than 95%] a result of human activity.

It concludes that the "anthropogenic signal" - the visible signs of human influence on the climate - has now emerged not just in global average surface temperatures, but in global ocean temperatures and ocean heat content. The IPCC points out that recent changes are far above the range of natural temperature variability over the past 650,000 years

To date, greenhouse gasses have caused global temperatures to rise by 0.6C. The report points out that the most likely outcome of continuing rises in greenhouses gases will be to make the planet a further 3C hotter by 2100, although ominously the report acknowledges that rises of from 2C- 4.5C are now almost inevitable and that rises up to 6.4C could be experienced.

The report points out that 12 of the past 13 years were the warmest since records began; glaciers, snow cover and permafrost have decreased in both hemispheres. Sea levels are currently rising at the rate of almost 2 mm a year.

The report also found that rising global temperatures will erode the planet's natural ability to absorb man-made CO2. This could lead to CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere rising by a further 44 per cent, causing global average temperatures to increase by an additional 1.2C by 2100.

It consequently predicts that the frequency of devastating storms will increase dramatically. Sea levels will rise over the century by around half a metre, deserts will spread; oceans become acidic, and deadly heatwaves will become more prevalent. Parts of Africa, Asia, South America and southern Europe could be made uninhabitable. Central London will be under water by the end of the century.

The impact will be catastrophic, forcing hundreds of millions to flee their devastated homelands, particularly in tropical, low-lying areas, creating waves of immigrants whose movements will strain the economies of even the richest countries.

The chilling thing about the IPCC report is that all its conclusions are on the lowest common denominator basis. It is the work of several thousand climate experts who have widely differing views about how greenhouse gases will have their effect. Some think they will have a major impact, others a lesser role. Only points that were considered indisputable won acceptance. It is therefore an overall conservative document.

In a sharp rebuff to those who continue to argue natural variation in the sun's output is the real cause of climate change, the IPCC says that in fact. "These changes took place at a time when non-anthropogenic forcing factors (i.e. the sum of solar and volcanic forcing) would be expected to have produced cooling, not warming". It concludes that

mankind's CO2 emissions over the past 250 years since the industrial revolution have had five times more effect on the climate than any fluctuations in solar radiation.

The report marks a decisive change in the debate on climate change from what is the cause of global warming, which is now resolved, to what is the solution to it.

In fact socialists and environmental campaigners will not be surprised at the reports findings. Many will have already reached conclusions which go beyond its cautious conclusions. They will, however, be strengthened by the fact that the IPCC has shifted the debate in their direction.

What the report, or the IPCC, or the UN does not and will not offer, however, is a viable solution to the problem. Their answer will be green capitalism achieved through market solutions such as carbon trading. Yet it is already clear that the needs of people and planet cannot be squared with capitalism's relentless expansion for profit (made worse in its current neo-liberal form).

There is an urgent need for global, statutory cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. Most campaigners see a 90 per cent cut in emissions by 2030, alongside major infrastructure changes and massive investments in renewables and energy efficiency by governments as essential if global warming is to be halted. Yet the only treaty agreed so far has been the Kyoto Protocol's paltry consensual 5 per cent. Its principal mechanism, carbon trading, has already failed and emissions continue to rise.

On the contrary the time has long gone when market mechanisms can have any real effect on this situation. We have to struggle for a different system, based on social and ecological needs. One which we ourselves control and plan democratically, rather than leave to the dictates of the market. Only eco-socialist planning can provide the framework for the kind of changes which are necessary to create a long term future for life on this planet.