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Climate Change

Cochabamba Summit of the Peoples: Some critical comments on the Final Declaration

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The Summit of the Peoples on the climate and the rights of Mother Earth, which met in Cochabamba (Bolivia) from 20-22 April, at the invitation of President Evo Morales, was an enormous success. Thirty thousand participants discussed for several days the various facets of the climate crisis and adopted a series of very interesting documents, from a resolutely anti-capitalist standpoint.

The Final Declaration of the Summit [1], which synthesizes this work, constitutes an important advance on the road of a convergence of social and environmental struggles from an anti-productivist and internationalist point of view. As ecosocialist militants, we can only express our satisfaction. At the same time, we think it is necessary to begin a fraternal debate on some lacunae in the document, which ought to be surmounted in the future, on the occasion of a future meeting of this type.

Following the declarations of Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez at the United Nations Summit, in December in Copenhagen, the Final Declaration of the conference clearly points to the capitalist origin of the deregulation of the climate that is taking place. The document denounces governments which discuss climate change as a simple question of temperature, as if the problem could be settled without calling into question the socio-economic system responsible for it. It underlines the complete incompatibility between a model based on the logic of competition, therefore of unlimited growth, on the one hand, and on the other the pressing need to respect the limits of the ecosystems and their rhythms: “the capitalist system has imposed on us a logic of competition, (...) and of unlimited growth. This mode of production and consumption seeks profit without limits, by separating human beings from nature, by establishing a logic of domination over nature, by converting everything into commodities: water, land, the human genome, ancestral cultures, biodiversity, justice, ethics, the rights of the people, death and life themselves”.

After having stigmatized the transformation of natural resources and human beings into commodities, the declaration denounces imperialist colonization, then concludes logically that it would be “irresponsible to leave in the hands of the market the care (cuidado) and protection of humankind and of our Mother Earth”. This strategic positioning is then translated into a series of concrete demands which link the ecological and the social: against the market in carbon, the REDD mechanism [2] (+ and ++), biofuels, GMOs, intellectual property laws on living organisms, Free Trade Treaties; for a world fund for adaptation and funds for clean technologies, for water to be recognized as a fundamental human right, for the respect of the rights of indigenous people, for support for peasant agriculture,...

Uncovering the cynicism of governments which do not envisage doing anything, while 100 million people could become “climatic refugees” in the next decades, the document demands the end of the restrictive and repressive immigration policies of Western countries, and demands that the funds assigned to military budgets be invested in the protection of the climate. It also denounces the flexible mechanisms which, under cover of technology transfers, actually aim at allowing the big companies of the North to continue to pollute, while making superprofits on the market in carbon. Faced with this new form of colonial exploitation, the declaration affirms that “knowledge is universal and can in no case be an object of private property and private use”. Consequently it argues for the sharing of technologies and their development in the service of “living well”.

Lastly, the document proposes concretely the installation of a sovereign international legal framework, equitably run by the populations of the world, whose goal would be to put an end to aberrations concerning the overexploitation of resources, environmental irresponsibility and inhuman treatment of migrant populations.

Although this anti-capitalist position is remarkable, we must however deplore certain lacunae. The most striking point

is that the oil, gas and coal oligarchies, as well as the big multinationals of the energy sector, are not accused of anything, nor even mentioned, whereas their responsibility for climate change is overwhelming. The document goes into detail on the harmful role of agribusiness in the degradation of the climate, but the word "oil" appears only once in the declaration, and even then only within the framework of the demand for non-exploitation of the deposits located in forest zones, in the name of the protection of the forests and the rights of indigenous people (which is a correct and legitimate but completely insufficient demand). The words "coal" and "natural gas" are simply not mentioned. The expression "renewable energies" is also absent. Moreover, the document contains neither rejection of nuclear power nor advice to be prudent about the possible risks of geological storage of CO₂... Putting all that together, we cannot avoid having the impression that the Declaration overlooks the struggle against the capitalist energy lobbies and the sectors linked to it (cars, petrochemicals, shipbuilding, the aeronautics industry, transport,...), whereas this is obviously the key question in the framework of an anti-capitalist strategy of stabilization of the climate.

We can also see the astonishing contrast between this absence and the radical nature of the objective of reduction in greenhouse gases that is advocated by the Declaration. It proposes, without touching on the question of the choice of energy resources, to commit itself to a reduction on a much greater scale than the most radical of the scenarios of the IPCC: 300 CO₂ equivalents ppm, not to exceed 1°C of rise in temperature compared to the preindustrial era.

However, to reach this level of stabilization, it is necessary to follow a series of stages that are impossible to circumvent, which relate mainly to the energy sector and the question of resources:

- the obligation to abandon fossil energy in the short term;

- the need to plan the replacement of fossil energy by renewable energy;

- the need to reduce the overall production and transport of raw materials so that this replacement is possible in practice;

- to do all of the above while bearing in mind the risk of obstructing the satisfaction of the legitimate needs of the three billion human beings who lack the essentials of life;

- to solve this problem in a human way, it is necessary and urgent to make energy common property, so that investments can be carried out according to needs and independently of costs, without social conflict;

- finally, putting energy under social ownership must be coupled with a redistribution of wealth, in order to mobilize the resources that are essential for the energy transition.

Of all that, the Declaration says nothing. However, without these radical measures, it will be quite simply impossible to stabilize the climate on the best possible level, not to mention satisfy the legitimate rights of the South with a development centred on the needs of the populations.

We can understand that the ultra-radical objective of 300 ppm CO₂ equivalent is put forward with the aim of limiting to the maximum the injustice of climate change for the populations which do not have any responsibility for the damage done. But unfortunately truth requires us to say that the limit of a 1°C rise can no longer be attained: the temperature has increased by 0.8°C since 1850, an additional rise of 0.6°C is "in the pipeline" (delayed only by thermal inertia from the oceans) and every year we add 2 to 3 ppm CO₂ to the atmosphere... In fact, even a rise of 2°C can probably no longer be avoided. The atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases (all such gases) is currently higher than 460 ppm CO₂ equivalent. The most radical of the stabilization scenarios mentioned in the 4th report of the IPCC estimates that there will be a concentration of between 445 and 490 ppm in 2050, corresponding to a rise in temperature of between 2 and 2.4°C and to a rise of the level of the oceans of between 0.4 and 1.4 m

(on balance). We could possibly return one day to 300 ppm, and a difference in temperature of 1°C compared to the preindustrial era, as the Declaration demands, but certainly not in the course of this century: that will demand a very long-term effort.

This problem is related to that of the distribution of effort between the developed countries and the rest of the world. As is known, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) urges taking account of the fact that the responsibility for global warming is common but differentiated. The respect of this principle is obviously crucial for the countries of the South, but the contradiction is that the more drastic the objective of stabilization is, the more it is necessary that the developing countries take part in the effort. Thus the most radical scenario of the IPCC implies that the developed countries reduce their emissions by between 80 and 95 per cent between now and 2050 (including a reduction of between 25 and 40 per cent by 2020), which means, roughly speaking, that they have forty years to dispense with fossil fuels and to reduce by half their final consumption of energy. In the name of the precaution principle, it is only logical and right to demand that the North make at least 40 per cent of reduction by 2020 and 95 per cent by 2050, not counting the purchases of carbon credits. But two remarks need to be made: 1) in this scenario, the effort of the countries of the South is not negligible, since their emissions should differ by between 15 and 30 per cent compared to the scenario of reference; 2) to go further, the countries of the North would need to have recourse to dangerous and socially doubtful technologies such as clean coal, biofuels and nuclear power... without even being certain that that would be enough.

So there is something unrealistic about the Declaration when it demands that the countries of the North not only go further than the most radical scenario of the IPCC, but are furthermore the only ones who have to make an effort. A precise figure is proposed: 50 per cent reduction in the developed capitalist countries between now and 2017. Even though we understand and share the indignation of the Declaration concerning the governments of these countries, we cannot remain silent on the exaggerated nature of this scenario. For it to be practicable, it would in fact be necessary for an anti-productivist socialist revolution to triumph tomorrow, simultaneously in all the developed capitalist countries (and even then!). This possibility is unfortunately not very probable, so that the question is: how do we address the working class of North so that it becomes aware of its crucial responsibility for the rescue of the climate?

To this question, the Declaration does not answer in a convincing way. The reason for this is that it establishes a dichotomy between the exploiting North and the exploited South, and thus fails to grasp the urgency of unifying the struggles of the exploited in the “developed” and “developing” countries. In the case of the South, the way in which the Declaration proposes to concretize the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities tends to ignore the necessary criticism of the productivist development strategies of certain ruling classes, such as those of Brazil, China or ... Venezuela, for example, as a large oil producer. This “third-worldist” manner of tackling the question is likely to provoke a reaction of rejection among the exploited of the North, who fear for their jobs or have already lost them because of the economic crisis. However, the fight for the climate will not progress if the exploited of all countries do not fight in a unified way.

Rather than launching the not very realistic figure of 50 per cent of reduction by 2017, this unity could be encouraged by pointing out that the countries of the South are already committed to doing almost the utmost of what is necessary to stabilize the climate, while the countries of the North are making less than half of the effort which is assigned to them. According to the IPCC, indeed, the developing countries should take measures so that their emissions in 2020 are between 15 and 30 per cent below “business as usual” projections. However, we see from the 120 climate plans communicated to the secretariat of the UNFCCC in the framework of the Copenhagen agreement that the commitments of the South are equivalent to an average difference of 25 per cent (almost the maximum, therefore). On the other hand, the climate plans communicated by the developed countries scarcely correspond to a reduction in emissions of 15 per cent compared to 1990, whereas the IPCC proposes for them a range of between 25 and 40 per cent. So we are not in a situation where the South needs to continue not to make any effort, as one might think from the Declaration. On the contrary, we are in a situation where the South is making a more than correct share of the

effort and where the North is not doing anything, although it is the North that is responsible historically! This reality provides a solid justification of the need for a drastic reduction in the emissions of the developed capitalist countries. Moreover, it cuts the grass from under the feet of all the demagogues who want to stir up the victims of the crisis in the North by making scapegoats of the peoples of the South.

Some progressive people who supported in general the approach taken by the Summit expressed reservations concerning an approach to climate justice based on the rights of Mother Earth. On reading the Declaration, however, we have to recognise that this conception of Mother Earth as the source of all life and of its right to exist in a balanced way introduces a completely new and interesting approach to “the right to live in a healthy environment”. Without necessarily adhering to the spiritual or mystical conception that the indigenous populations of Latin America have of their relationship with Pachamama, one can only note that, over and above the different cultural references, the very clear points that the declaration develops concerning international policies of commoditisation and the plundering of nature make it possible for completely different cultures to come together around a common objective: to push back the logic of profit and exploitation which is endangering the right of people to live in a stable climatic situation. As regards the environmental crisis, it is undeniable that the cosmological vision of indigenous people, based on the idea that matter and energy circulate unceasingly within nature considered as a whole, constitutes an invaluable contribution, which must be appreciated at its true value.

But, however valid it is, this dynamic vision of the interrelationships between humanity and the rest of nature cannot replace precise demands such as the pure and simple expropriation of the monopolies, initially in the energy sector. Without this expropriation, indeed, the respect of the rhythms and cycles of the biosphere will remain a chimera, for the simple reason that it will not be possible to implement radical and internationally equitable policies of energy and productive transition. From this point of view, the text is in fact at a crossroads between a radical, revolutionary refusal of the capitalist system, on the one hand, and on the other a positioning which is more ambiguous than it seems at first sight, favourable to a “change that has to be made to the present capitalist system”.

The Summit of the Peoples, let us repeat, constitutes a remarkable step forward towards a climatic strategy worthy of the name, i.e. an anti-capitalist strategy. All the exploited and oppressed of the world are indebted to the Bolivian people who took the initiative for this event, through their elected president. They are indebted in particular to indigenous people, who play a leading role by showing that another relation between humanity and nature is possible and necessary. It is within the framework of this eminently positive assessment that we wish to contribute to a constructive debate.

[1] See “Bolivia: “People’s Agreement” adopted by the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth”:// www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article17130

[2] The Program of the United Nations on the reduction of emissions resulting from deforestation and forest degradation in the developing countries (UN-REDD) aims at reducing this figure by allotting to the forests a financial value based on their carbon storage capacity.