

Combating climate change: A major social and political challenge

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In the worst case scenario 150 million people could be obliged to relocate between now and 2050 following the rise in ocean levels due to planetary warming [1]. At the same time, deaths due to lack of water, malaria and famine could increase respectively by three billion, 300 million and 50-100 million.

Although this picture of climate change effects is already more than worrying, three other elements should be added, whose importance should be clear to everyone:

- the agricultural repercussions. Beyond a 3°C increase in average surface temperature, it is very probable that the overall productivity of cultivated ecosystems will be affected. Below this limit, negative impacts will be felt (are already felt) in vast tropical and subtropical regions, in Africa and in South America mainly;
- the effects on ecosystems. Warming now has clear observable consequences, some of which will have serious implications for certain populations : an accelerated decline in biodiversity (- 25% according to a study published in the magazine "Nature"), loss of coral reefs, increased fragility of mangrove forests and big forest groupings like that of the Amazon.

How will the capitalist system manage such situations? The question continues to be of concern if we consider the policies already implemented in certain concrete cases, like the Pacific islands, or New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, or we examine the strategic scenarios of certain "experts".

Pacific islands

In certain small Pacific island states, the threat of warming is already experienced as a painful everyday problem. In early December 2005, the population of Lateu, a small village of around 100 inhabitants on the island of Tegua, in the Polynesian state of Vanuatu, was displaced to escape increasing frequent floods [2]: the coral barrier no longer provides sufficient protection from hurricanes, with the coast being eroded by 2 to 3 metres per year. Lateu is the first case of collective relocation following the rise in ocean levels. But Tuvalu, another Pacific state, already has three thousand climate refugees. Situated 3,400 km to the northeast of Australia, this country (26 km² of more or less firm land) is made up of eight atolls rising to 4.5 metres above sea level. It could well go down in history as the first country which has had to be completely evacuated because of climate

change.

Conscious of the situation, in 2000 the government of Tuvalu asked Australia and New Zealand to undertake to take in its 11,636 residents if need be. Canberra refused, on the pretext that a collective agreement would be “discriminatory” in relation to other refugee candidates. As for New Zealand, it only agreed to accept 74 people a year, on condition that they were aged between 18 and 45, had a “suitable” employment offer in New Zealand (paid work, full time, open ended), can prove their knowledge of English, are in good health and possess sufficient resources if they have a dependant [3]. To get a full picture of this policy, remember that Australia, for example, has three inhabitants per km², that its GDP per inhabitant is 29,632 dollars/year [4], that it has refused to ratify Kyoto and that it is one of the biggest carbon users on the planet.

Katrina, New Orleans

“The poor will be the main victims of climate change”, warns the IPCC The Katrina affair shows that this warning is also true for the developed countries. There is no basis for saying that the hurricane which devastated New Orleans in August 2005 was due to the increase in atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases. But the violence of hurricanes in the North Atlantic has doubled over the last thirty years, probably following warming [5]. Above all, the crisis management has been very revealing. Before, during and after.

Before? Whereas the threat weighing on the capital of jazz had been known about for a long time, the federal state, to finance its bellicose adventures, had from 2001 slashed the budgets of the body charged with flood prevention, the SELA (Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project), whose management was responsible to the Army Engineering Corps. In early 2004, the administration granted barely 20% of what had been requested for the strengthening of the Lake Pontchartrain levees. At the end of the year, in spite of unprecedented cyclonic activity, the SELA received a sixth of what it had requested: 10 million dollars.

Meanwhile, in July, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had drawn up an emergency plan based on the cynical hypothesis that the poor (30% of the population, 67% of them black), would stay in the city in case of flooding — since they did not have the financial resources to pay for their evacuation. “The residents need to know they’ll be on their own for several days”, said Michael Brown, head of the FEMA. In July 2005, the city authorities warned the inhabitants that they would be “largely responsible for their own safety”. [6].

During? 138,000 of the 480,000 inhabitants without aid for five days, more than 1,000 dead, brutal repression of initiatives aimed at survival (characterised systematically as “pillage”)... These facts have been widely reported by the media. It is clear that they are not explained solely by negligence or disorder, but by a logic which was anti-poor, class-based, racist and arrogant, in which sordid real estate speculations seem to have played a not inconsiderable role. The statements of George W. Bush and his entourage provide numerous confirmations of it [7].

After? Less known to the public, certain measures taken in the context of reconstruction are also very significant: minimum wage suppressed, public contracts granted to crony companies (Halliburton!) without tenders, hindrance of the return of poor populations to enable a remodelling of the city and so on [8]. In short: a good example of the manner in which capital can use the ecological crisis to improve the conditions of its valorisation...

Threat of barbarism

The Pacific islands and Katrina shed light on what the neoliberals mean by “managing the consequences of warming”. If we project these examples to the global scale, there is no escaping the conclusion: in a few decades, climate change could serve as a prop to barbaric scenarios of a breadth as unprecedented as the disturbance of the climate by human activity.

Certain conservative “think tanks” make no secret of their projects in the area. In a study on the implications of serious climate change for the national security of the USA, two “experts” write coldly that “nations with the resources to do so” like the US and Australia “may build virtual fortresses around their countries, preserving resources for themselves”. All around these fortresses, “deaths from war as well as starvation and disease [due to warming] will decrease population size which, over time, will re-balance with carrying capacity” [9]. Too few commentators have drawn attention to the fact that the scientific value of this so-called “study” is non-existent (notably because, inspired by the disaster film “The Day After” it posits the dual threat of a new glaciation and that of a rise in ocean levels, which is nonsense). But of most concern is the absence of protest in scientific circles faced with the fact that the ecological concept of “carrying capacity” of ecosystems is used in support of an abject socio-political project: the massive extermination of the poor.

Unhappily, this report does not constitute an exception. The list of reactionary outpourings aroused by warming is in fact very long. Thus other “experts” envisage completing the market in greenhouse gas emission rights by a market in “rights to procreate” pm the pretext that the “galloping demography” of developing countries is a major cause of climate destabilisation. Serious ideological and social battles take place on these questions. We have seen it with the attempt – aborted — at infiltration of the most important US nature protection association, the Sierra Club, by far right moles, so that the halting of immigration should become the priority “ecological” demand [10]. The neoliberal management of climate change could be still more dangerous than this change itself.

Necessity of a mobilisation, need of an alternative

Numerous signs indicate that the struggle for the climate will increasingly constitute a major social and political issue. Beyond the Kyoto protocol (a first very insufficient step) the response of the capitalist system is in the process of being sketched out and refined under our eyes. It will consist notably in using the serious threat of warming to push an accentuation of neoliberal policies generating exclusion, domination, inequality and degradation of the environment. Another climate policy is then necessary. A policy which can save the climate in social justice, democracy and respect for ecosystems, on the world scale. A policy which redistributes wealth radically and puts an end to productivism. The imposition of this policy necessitates the broadest mobilisation, on a world scale.

In this perspective, information plays a role which is all the more important in that it concerns areas with which activists in the social movements are still not sufficiently familiar. In February 2005, the International Committee of the Fourth International decided to “devote growing attention to the climate question and climate policy, notably through the press of the sections and of the International”. this number of International Viewpoint is intended as a contribution to the necessary effort of consciousness raising, inside our movement and beyond. Although it was drawn up before the publication (on February 1st, 2007) of the fourth evaluation report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and it has not integrated certain recent proposals (like the proposal for a new energy policy for Europe formulated by the European Commission in January of the same year) we hope that it will supply to the anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal left a first battery

of tools allowing it to take its place in the great battle which has begun.

Appendix

Climate and food self-sufficiency

According to a report by the FAO, "In some 40 poor, developing countries, with a combined population of two billion, including 450 million undernourished people, production losses due to climate change may drastically increase the number of undernourished people, severely hindering progress in combating poverty and food insecurity". The countries of sub-Saharan Africa would pay the heaviest price. There are an estimated 1.1 billion hectares of arid land where the period of growth of cultures is lower than 120 days. Between now and 2080, this surface could increase from 5% to 8%. Beyond Africa, all the tropical and sub-tropical regions would be affected. The cereal production of 65 countries containing more than half of the population of the developing world could fall by some 280 million tonnes (or 16% of the agricultural GDP of these countries).

Source: <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/FR/news/2005/102623/index.html>

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] 30 million in China, 30 million in India, 15-20 million in Bangladesh, 14 million in Egypt (Myers 1994, cited by Friends of the Earth Australia, "A Citizen's Guide to Climate Refugees", 2005

[2] *Environment News Service*, January 12, 2006

[3] Friends of the Earth Australia, 2005, op. cit.

[4] GDP/inhabitant corrected by variations in purchasing power

[5] "Nature", July 31, 2005

[6] Jessica Azulay, "FEMA planned to Leave New Orleans Poor Behind", <http://newstandardnews.net>

[7] Questioned on the extremely precarious conditions in which the refugees were left in Texas, Bush's mother stated: "so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this — this is working very well for them.", "Editor & Publisher", September 5, 2005

[8] Patrick Le Tréhondat and Patrick Silberstein, "L'ouragan Katrina, le désastre annoncé", Syllepse, 2005

[9] "An abrupt Climate Change Scenario and its Implications for US National Security", P. Schwartz and D. Randall, Oct. 2003. The text has been published on numerous sites, notably that of Greenpeace

[10] "Bitter Division for Sierra Club on Immigration", *The New York Times*, March 16, 2004