

The Road from Copenhagen

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THE HANDWRITING ABOUT the long-anticipated Copenhagen climate change conference has been on the wall for months, and its message is not promising for our human civilization or the thousands of species we may take down with us. By the time of that frantic final day of backroom arm-twisting, blackmail and president Obama's lead-balloon speech, it no longer really mattered whether the conference's failure would be openly admitted, or thinly disguised behind a "political framework statement" without serious mechanisms for implementation, measurement or enforcement.

One bit of good news is that the growing global understanding of imminent violent climate change and its implications hasn't been sidetracked by the so-called "climategate" of emails stolen from the East Anglia research center. Wouldn't it be interesting, by the way, to have a look at the internal emails of those fake "climate coalitions" and "Quango" (Quasi-Non-Governmental Organizations) institutes created and funded by Big Oil?

The realities of global warming, from the well-established data to the melting glaciers, are quite clear to most of the world except to some degree in the politically backward United States of America. That hasn't been in question at Copenhagen. The issue isn't the science, it's the politics.

Barack Obama the campaigner pledged that the United States would take the lead in aggressively tackling climate change and reversing the obfuscation and obstructionism of the Bush gang. With global carbon emissions still on the increase and the world as we know it spinning into climate chaos, all know that the policy of this country — which still leads the world in per-capita pollution — is decisive.

Yet the only thing Obama the President aggressively led in the months leading up to Copenhagen was an international diplomatic campaign to destroy any expectations for a substantial binding agreement on emissions reductions. It was unsure whether anything measuring up even to Kyoto's insufficient standard would result. The president himself had scheduled his drop-in at Copenhagen, safely before any "hard bargaining" would begin, on his way to Oslo to collect the Nobel Peace Prize.

As it became apparent that this would be viewed as a political snub, Obama's schedule changed so that he would participate with other leaders in the final negotiations. The underlying question, however, persists: With the potential to derail international negotiations and lock-in a climatically destabilized and overheated planet, how do we explain the change from Obama the environmentalist campaigner to his presidential stance?

The main answer lies in the fatal combination of Obama's own political strategy and the current balance of forces in U.S. politics.

Climate vs. Bombs and Band-aids

Let's be honest: No one said that changing course to avoid environmental catastrophe is easy. It can be done, and the necessary technology exists to do so, but converting to a sustainable economy and renewable energy requires action both from above and from below, from legislative and executive confrontation with entrenched corporate power down to mass commitment on the community level. Saving the environment must also go hand in hand with ending poverty and drastically reducing the obscene inequalities in our own society and the world. Only in this way can anyone expect the rural and urban poor of the global South to feel a common stake with the already-rich societies which produced the doubling of atmospheric CO₂ since the Industrial Revolution. That should have been the laser-like focus of a U.S. president's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance address.

Instead, to the shock of many of his supporters, president Obama made his peace award the occasion for a war speech. The imperial folly of sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan is the subject of another editorial statement in this issue of *Against the Current*, but it also feeds back into the environmental struggle. Climate catastrophe cannot be averted while trying to maintain U.S. control of the world, continuing the business-as-usual insanity of U.S.-led global military spending, and relying on "cap-and-trade" band-aids.

This is where politics come to the fore. The high expectations of the millions who voted Obama into office — including many active in the new climate or environmental movements — could have been mobilized to confront the corporations and the right and put more aggressive solutions on the table. And the economic depression raised discussions on economic alternatives, the social function of banking, and direction of the industrial economy that could have been deepened. "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste," is the Obama administration's famous mantra — and they've sure enough wasted it.

As became clear during the bank and auto bailouts, Obama — far from representing a challenge to the rule of capital — represents perhaps just what the corporate elite need at this time: a progressive-sounding, less bellicose statesman who is nonetheless committed to leaving the substantial specifics in the hands of business.

The auto and financial bankruptcies provided the opportunity to confront the social crimes of U.S. finance and organize a retooling of the transportation industry. Instead, we got an inadequate stimulus and a world-historic theft of the public treasury to pad the corporate bottom-line. So, Obama's hands-off approach on the nitty-gritty of climate change legislation is of a pattern. But the stakes are infinitely higher in this case for the future of humanity.

In the run-up to Copenhagen, Obama claimed he didn't want to interfere with Congressional debates on climate legislation, thus surrendering policy to the pollution lobby, just as the writing of "health care reform" wound up in the hands of the for-profit insurance industry. Last summer the House passed the Waxman-Markey bill — the basis for Obama's late announced Copenhagen proposal — mandating emission reductions of 17% of 2005 levels by 2020 and 83% by 2050. Even if achieved, the 2020 reductions wouldn't even reach the insufficient Kyoto mandates, and the new baseline of 2005 (rather than Kyoto's 1990) tilts things further in favor of the polluters.

More troubling, these reductions are to come about through establishing a cap-and-trade and "offset" market in carbon emission rights. Credits would be given away at the start, ensuring that they remain cheap enough for business, while the purchase of offsets (buying a section of Brazilian forest that may never be cut anyway) permit to industry to claim reductions with no net decrease and even possible increases in emissions.

The bill would provide millions in subsidies to polluters and the nuclear industry, with only a tiny fraction going to public transportation (in the same way that “health care reform” massively subsidizes the existing insurance industry). The White House had to twist arms of more knowledgeable or recalcitrant Democrats who rightly saw this as a handout to industry, while coal politicians like Virginia Republican Rich Boucher happily lent support to it for precisely that reason.

Indulgences for Emissions

The leading climate researcher James Hansen, the NASA scientist whom the Bush regime tried to silence and the author of the new book *Storms of My Grandchildren*, had it just right in his comments during the Copenhagen conference’s closing days. Interviewed on Canadian Broadcasting Company radio (“The Current,” December 16, 2009), Dr. Hansen expressed the view that a deal based on “cap-and-trade” is worse than none at all:

“What’s going on there isn’t going to solve the problem. It’s analogous to the ‘indulgences’ of the Middle Ages, when the Catholic Church sold permissions to sin. The developed countries want to continue business as usual, and the developing countries will accept that if they can get some money.”

The cap-and-trade system, Hansen states, “was devised because of the revolving door between Wall Street and the government.” He advocates instead a system of steadily rising fees on greenhouse-emitting fuels, imposed at the point of production or port of entry to raise their price and encourage conservation and alternative technology, with proceeds to be rebated as “dividends” to the public. This obviously makes economic and social good sense — but then again, so does single-payer national health insurance, and the political blockages are equally obvious.

President Obama, with nothing but rhetoric and Waxman-Markey in his hand when asked how his administration’s climate policy differed from his disastrous predecessors, was left only to say that “we’ve embraced the latest science” and “participated in international negotiations” — essentially, to purchase the agreement of less affluent nations with payments from rich countries for some (inadequate) “climate change preparations.” The Copenhagen drama has really been about money, not principle.

Should the less affluent countries’ own emissions be monitored and rigorously verified? In principle, of course, yes — but agreement on this is pretty much utopian in light of the wealthy states’ behavior. A walkout of the representatives of 130 developing countries at the October Bangkok meetings was provoked by a Canadian proposal to do away with internationally binding emissions reductions and to let each country determine for itself how to reduce emissions. A subsequent scandal erupted at Copenhagen with the revelation of internal Canadian government proposals to exempt the Alberta Tar Sands development from emission controls.

Capital vs. Nature

Underlying the disastrous combination of Obama’s conciliatory political strategy and the no-holds-barred stance of the corporate elite is another and deeper contradiction that has guaranteed the failure of any climate measures negotiated by the big industrialized countries and their economic leaders: the ultimate incompatibility between capitalism and nature.

The endless accumulation process of the industrial capitalist economy is based on the pillage of nature. Global warming is a particular and global manifestation of this more general and many-sided

destruction. The exploitation of fossil fuels has been — and remains — intrinsic to the operation of capitalism, from the development of the modern 24-hour-run factory to the maintenance of the war machines that defend capitalist rule. But technological development has also overwhelmed the ocean fish stocks that were once thought inexhaustible, as well as the fresh water reserves and even the soil of the planet on which agriculture depends.

For an economic and social system organized for the accumulation and exchange of abstract value, nature can be nothing more than a pool of free, exploitable resources and a sink for its trash. From the Ecuadorian Amazon, where Chevron-Texaco dumped billions of gallons of toxic waste for more than 20 years, to the release of radioactive wastewater due to gas drilling in New York and Pennsylvania, to the truly gigantic environment-killing projects of Canada's Alberta Tar Sands and China's Three Gorges Dam, the pollution of the earth and corporate attack on communities are a vital part of modern "business as usual."

It's the road from Copenhagen that matters. We can take courage that our fate isn't settled at international conference tables, that Copenhagen is not the endgame but an index of where the struggle is at and where it needs to go. That the environmental crisis is real, and serious, is now given. Whether its consequences for human society will be "only" severe, or catastrophic, or apocalyptic, hangs in the balance and depends on humanity's collective choices.

A new climate justice movement is emerging. Coal moratorium activists are protesting existing and planned coal plants — and shutting them down. Networks like Rising Tide North America and 350.org are organizing internationally coordinated demonstrations. We are part of building this new climate and eco-justice mass movement, which is our only guarantee to replace capitalism with a world worthy of humanity and the rest of nature.

The Editors

P.S.

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