

The COP27 Climate Summit Was Another Exercise in Corporate Greenwashing

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Last week's COP27 summit in Egypt ended with the world still on track for a disastrous rise in global temperatures. But a new climate policy from Brazil after Jair Bolsonaro's defeat was one ray of hope for those on the front lines of the climate crisis.

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s world leaders gathered for this year's COP27 climate summit in Egypt, the sister of jailed British-Egyptian activist Alaa Abd el-Fattah addressed the following words to the international media:

At this conference, the most vulnerable are supposed to negotiate with the most powerful. I want to say that whatever chance my brother has at surviving will come from people who are vulnerable. It will come from those paying the price for others' luxury; from those locked into a system they did not choose.

Alaa had begun a [hunger strike](#) in protest of the refusal of the Egyptian authorities to allow a visit by UK government representatives. His plight symbolized that of the approximately sixty thousand political prisoners in this year's host country. This quiet battle unmasked the cynical and dangerous alliance of world leaders with authoritarian regimes and oil powers like next year's host, the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

An Exclusive Affair

The COP26 summit in Glasgow last year had already set a new benchmark for exclusivity due to pandemic restrictions and the high price of travel and accommodation in the UK. Yet the country [hosting this year's event](#) has taken things much further by banning public demonstrations, arresting dissidents, and blocking the participation of more than six hundred news agencies and human rights organizations.

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The criminalization of climate justice activism is not restricted to Egypt. From Britain to Germany, conservatives are calling for stronger repression of protest actions by the “last generation” or “generation Z.” While the German government has failed on its climate action promises, conservative politicians denounce expressions of civil disobedience, [comparing protesters](#) to the [Baader-Meinhof](#) urban guerrillas of the 1970s. Meanwhile figures like World Bank chief David Malpass, an appointee of Donald Trump, still engage in [blatant denial of the climate crisis](#).

COP27 had been branded the “Africa COP.” Since Africans are suffering and will suffer most from the effects of climate change, the summit promised a heightened focus on “loss and damage.” While all continents have seen extreme weather events in 2022, those in Africa are chronically underreported. This year [alone](#), Nigeria’s worst flood in a decade [killed over six hundred people](#), and wildfires battered Algeria while drought and famine [put millions in East Africa](#) at risk of starvation.

Africa causes only 4 percent of global emissions. Yet almost half of the continent’s young people as surveyed in a UNICEF poll said they had reconsidered the idea of having children because of the climate crisis. The South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, emphasized a familiar theme at these summits: the failure of rich countries to deliver on previous commitments, which undermines trust in the whole process.

Every year, negotiators and activists from the Global South fight to keep the key original principles of the climate summits on the agenda: polluters should pay for the damage they have caused and there should be common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) for the climate crisis. They press for the payment of reparations along with adequate compensation and support for the regions that will carry the burden of climate chaos generated by carbon emissions in the Northern states.

Half of all global emissions are [caused](#) by the world’s richest 10 percent. Those emissions [must fall by 45 percent by 2030](#) if we are to have any chance of achieving the Paris Agreement’s goal of limiting warming to 1.5°C. But the Emissions Gap Report at COP27 from the UN Environmental Programme reported “inadequate progress” since the Glasgow summit: current trends and policies suggest we are likely to see as much as a [2.8°C hike](#) in global temperature.

Talking the Talk, Blocking the Walk

There is a familiar pattern to these summits, and COP27 was no exception. In the first week, high-level political leaders from the Global North will usually deliver speeches at a safe distance from any protesters, showcasing the ambitious commitments of their countries while lamenting past delays and shirking responsibility.

German chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized his government’s plans to reach net zero by 2045 and end the use of fossil fuels, while environmental groups at home condemn the inadequacy of those plans. The US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, talked a lot about progressive climate policy but said nothing about his country’s failure to provide financial support for the Global

South.

When politicians like Scholz and Kerry fly home, they leave their delegates to block or weaken most demands for binding North-South transfers. Technical debates allow Northern representatives to hide their unwillingness to take responsibility and relinquish control.

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The negotiations around [loss and damage](#) were the key battle of the Africa COP. China and the 134 countries joined together in the Group of 77 have for decades called for a stand-alone facility dedicated specifically to loss and damage, which could be financed, for example, by a global carbon tax on fossil-fuel companies.

In opposition to this proposal, the European Union and the United States, along with countries like New Zealand and Canada, proposed using existing funds like the World Bank-controlled Green Climate Fund or the Global Environment Facility. They also raised the idea of completely private mechanisms such as risk-insurance facilities and bilateral support, which would leave them in control.

These countries want to evade any form of liability or binding compensation. In the face of this obstruction, the last-minute agreement to set up a special fund for affected countries in the Global South is a victory. Southern countries have also gained ground in further negotiations over the mechanism for implementing it.

Broken Promises

Obviously, the historic responsibility of the industrialized world goes beyond mitigation aid. The cost of responding to climate change in the Global South is expected to run into trillions of dollars. Figures like John Kerry have tried to pass the buck, arguing that “governments don’t have that kind of money” and calling for the mobilization of private resources.

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There is also a stalemate over demands for the cancellation of the [unjust historic debt](#) with which poor countries are burdened. Such relief would provide those countries with the fiscal space needed for climate action. The least developed countries (LDCs) in particular have little access to finance for the implementation of national adaptation plans (NAPs).

In addition, summit participants have called for reform of the Bretton Woods system of international financial institutions to ensure that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund support climate action instead of helping to make things worse. Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, the World Bank has spent approximately \$15 billion on fossil-fuel projects.

When it comes to mitigation, negotiators at COP27 discussed further how carbon markets would function as a “cooperative” mechanism under Article 6.4 of the Paris agreement. This procedure allows polluting companies such as airlines and car manufacturers to buy carbon credits from forest conservation and proclaim themselves to be “net-zero” while carrying on with business as usual. It will probably turn Global South countries into exporters of carbon and prevent them from reaching their own targets, to the benefit of luxury consumption in the North.

Corporate Greenwashing

Corporate greenwashing has been a central pattern of recent COPs: the only question is what major [polluter](#) is going to take its turn this year. Unilever sponsored COP26 in Glasgow, but this year’s summit was “brought to you by [Coca-Cola](#).” As well as being a major plastic polluter, Coca-Cola has deprived local communities in countries like [India](#) of access to clean water [and dodged paying taxes](#) to the tune of [several billion US dollars](#).

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There were [25 percent more fossil-fuel lobbyists](#) registered at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh than at its predecessor, with a total of [636](#) representing some of the world’s biggest polluters. There were more representatives of fossil-fuel interests than there were delegates from the [ten countries most impacted by climate change](#) — Puerto Rico, Myanmar, Haiti, Philippines, Mozambique, the Bahamas, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, and Nepal — and their bloc was twice as large as the UN constituency for indigenous peoples.

This lobbying presence allows these corporate interests to [shape the response](#) to the climate crisis. Earlier this year, the European Parliament controversially decided to [categorize](#) nuclear and gas power as environmentally sustainable economic activities. Fossil-fuel companies are using the energy crisis to maintain their power while peddling false solutions that will permit the existing system to continue. COP27 did not even end with the weakest commitment from leaders to “phase down” (not phase out) fossil fuels.

Energy companies promote “blue hydrogen” or [fossil fuel hydrogen](#), which emits only water, not climate-wrecking CO₂. This is being presented as one way of solving the climate emergency, along with the [carbon capture and storage](#) (CCS) environmental fix that would bury CO₂ in the ground. But CCS technology is much too undeveloped and expensive as an alternative to what environmentalists,

scientists, and others have long been calling for: an end to the use of fossil fuels.

Overall, the global complex of major tech, energy, pharmaceutical, and agricultural firms all used COP27 as a platform: organizing events, commissioning studies, and seeking endorsements from celebrities and political leaders, all as part of an effort to undermine the fight for global climate justice and channel the debate into the terrain of “green capitalism.” Activist groups from countries that collectively represent [about 70 percent of the world’s population](#) have repeatedly demanded that these conflicts of interest must be addressed, but to no avail.

Hope From Brazil

In this bleak context, it was welcome to see the change of leadership in Brazil, home to the world’s “green lung,” the Amazon rainforest. Following his [victory](#) in last month’s presidential election, Lula [seized the opportunity](#) to affirm his incoming government’s commitment to climate action after the destructive record of far-right, climate-denialist president Jair Bolsonaro. Although the broad alliances underpinning his government have resulted in compromises on environmental policy, Lula’s return to the international political scene as president can have a positive impact on demands for climate justice at the climate summits.

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Domestically, Lula has made a commitment to domestic climate and environmental action, including the implementation of the Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm) that achieved historic emission reductions during previous Workers’ Party (PT) terms, and the foundation of a ministry for indigenous and traditional peoples. Together with Germany and Norway, Brazil will reopen the Amazon fund that the PT government founded in 2008 before it was eliminated by Bolsonaro. This fund was an alternative to carbon markets, and an important case for North-South climate finance of forest protection that emphasized the need for control over funds by the recipient country and support for public policies and local initiatives.

The foreign policy of previous PT administrators prioritized North-South cooperation, peace, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation. Lula’s new government has promised to revive this spirit, although its success in doing so will depend on the balance of forces at the Brazilian foreign ministry in particular. Having eradicated hunger in Brazil previously, Lula is a credible leader for the defense of social and racial justice and equality.

At COP27, the new Brazilian president scolded Northern donors for their refusal to honor their commitments. He called for reform of the UN and financial mechanisms for loss and damage that will respect the territorial integrity of countries in the Global South. Building on an earlier joint announcement with the presidents of Colombia and Venezuela, Lula proposed an alliance for regional development, integration, and protection of the rainforest.

He also offered to host 2025’s COP30 in the Brazilian Amazon: too often, questions about development in the Amazon have been decided upon far away from the region. Although Lula did not

defend climate activists in his COP27 speech, but rather thanked the Egyptian host government, international leadership from Brazil and others in the Global South will be important in promoting multilateralism and peace, the fight against hunger, environmental integrity, and equality.

Domestically, however, Lula's administration faces a strong agribusiness bloc and a weak environmental faction in the federal parliament. The new president referred to agribusiness as a strategic ally and came to the summit with Helder Barbalho, governor of the Amazon state Pará. Barbalho advocates a pro-market "bioeconomy" approach that does not put restraints on agribusiness. It will require domestic and international mobilization to make Lula's pledges of a more just and humane world into a reality.

Neither this COP summit nor the one due to be held next year in the UAE will break the power of fossil-fuel interests. As the only multilateral space where global climate action can be negotiated, the COP summits should expel polluters and put those most affected by the climate crisis at the center. Until that happens, the willingness of activists like Alaa Abd el-Fattah to put their lives on their line is the real source of hope in the struggle for climate justice.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 11.21.2022:

- <https://jacobin.com/2022/11/cop27-greenwashing-climate-inequality>

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