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Climate Change

Copenhagen: Collapse at the summit, rank-and-file victory

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We knew the United Nations summit in Copenhagen would not conclude with a new international treaty but a simple statement of intent - just one more. But the text adopted at the end of the meeting is worse than anything we could imagine: no quantified objectives for emissions reduction, no reference year for measuring them, no deadlines, no date!

The text included a vague promise of 100 billion dollars yearly for adaptations in developing countries, but the formulas used and various comments lead us to fear that these will be loans administered by major financial institutions rather than true reparations paid by those responsible for the mess.

The document is totally incoherent. Heads of state and government recognize that "climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time", but at the closing of the fifteenth conference of its kind, they are still incapable of taking the slightest concrete measure to meet this challenge. They admit - this is a first! - the need to remain "below 2°degrees" temperature increase, hence the need for deep cuts in emissions "according to science, and as documented by the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report". However they are incapable of endorsing the quantified conclusions drawn by climatologists: at least 40% cut in 2020 and 95% in 2050 in developed countries. They emphasize their "strong political will" to "cooperate in achieving" (this goal) (less than 2°C temperature increase) but have nothing to propose beyond a hodgepodge of proposals, with each country communicating to the others what it intends to do, by February 1st 2010.

Trapped by the hyper-mediatisation they orchestrated themselves, the powerful of our world found themselves in the spotlight, with nothing to show beyond their sordid rivalries. Thus, the representatives of 26 major countries booted out the NGOs, sidelined small States and scribbled a text whose major purpose is to convey the impression that there is a political pilot in the plane. But there is no pilot. Or rather, it's an automatic pilot: the race for profit among capitalist groups rushing into the trade war for world markets. Candidate Obama and the European Union promised to the high heavens that business would have to pay for their emissions rights. Snake oil!: at the end of the day, most companies received these rights free of charge and are making profits on them, selling them off and billing consumers for them! The rest is in keeping. Don't touch the money, that is the watchword.

This so-called agreement is oozing impotence from every pore. You can't just tell the climate to stay below 2°C. If this can still be possible, there are drastic conditions to fulfil. These involve definitely consuming less energy, thus transforming and transporting less matter. Less must be produced for solvent demand and at the same time human needs must be met, in particular in the poor countries. How can this be done? This is the key question. It isn't so hard to solve. We could stop producing weapons, eliminate advertising budgets, and do away with many types of useless productions, activities and transports. But this would come up against capitalist productivism, the race for profits than requires growth. A sacrilege! That is taboo! And the outcome of this race? While world emissions have to be cut 80% by 2050 at the latest, although developed countries are responsible for more than 70% of warming, the only concrete measure specified in the agreement is a halt to deforestation... which only concerns the South and represents 17% of emissions. Ecological headway? No way! "Protecting" tropical forests (by expelling the people who live there!) is the cheapest way for polluters to buy the right to keep on producing (weapons, advertising, etc) and to pollute ... thus to keep on destroying forests via warming. This is how the law of profit corrupts everything it touches and changes everything into its opposite.

Fortunately, in the face of this total collapse at the summit, Copenhagen was a magnificent rank-and-file victory. The international demonstration on Saturday 12 December brought together some 100 000 people. The only precedent for such a massive mobilization on this issue was were the different simultaneous marches that brought together 200.000 Australian citizens at once, in November 2007. But this was a national mobilization and Australia was being

hard-hit by the impact of warming. This is not (yet) the case in the European countries where most of the demonstrators came from, flocking to the Nordic capital to cries of "Planet first, people first", despite ferocious police repression.

Copenhagen symbolizes this new consciousness. It was the expression of participation of social movements that until very recently were on the sidelines of ecological issues, and sometimes even suspicious of them: women's organizations, peasant movements, trade unions, North-South solidarity associations, peace movements, global justice movements etc. Indigenous people are playing a key role by struggling against forest destruction (in a power relationship worthy of David confronting Goliath!), symbolizing at once resistance to the dictatorship of profit and the possibility of another relation between humanity and nature. Yet all these forces count more on collective action than on lobbying, so dear to major environmental associations. Their coming onto the scene has radically moved the centre of gravity. From now on, the struggle for an ecologically effective and socially just international treaty will play out in the street - more than in the corridors of summit meetings - and will be a social battle - more than a debate among specialists.

While the official summit gave birth to a scrap of paper, social mobilization and the alternative summit laid the political foundations for rank-and-file action to carry out in the coming months "Change the system, not the climate", "Planet not profit", "bla bla bla Act Now", "Nature doesn't compromise", "Change the Politics, not the climate", "There is no PLANet B". Despite its limitations (particularly in terms of the role of the United Nations) Klimaforum09's declaration is a good text, rejecting the carbon market, climate neocolonialism and offsetting emissions by planting trees, or other phoney techniques. More and more people understand it: climate degradation is not the outcome of "human activity" in general but of a mode of an unsustainable mode of production and consumption. And they draw the logical conclusion: the climate can't be saved only through changing individual behaviour; on the contrary this will take deep structural changes. It means putting the onus on the race for profits, because this race inevitably leads to an exponential growth in production, waste and transport of materials, thus of emissions.

Is the summit's failure a disaster? On the contrary, it is excellent news. Excellent news because it is time to stop this blackmail claiming that in exchange for fewer emissions, it would take more neoliberalism, more markets. Excellent news because the treaty that governments could conclude today would be ecologically inadequate, socially criminal and technologically dangerous. It would provoke a rise in temperature between 3.2 and 4.9°C, a rise in ocean levels from 60cm to 2.9 metres (at least) and a headlong rush to sorcerer's apprentice technologies (nuclear power, agrifuels, GMOs and "clean coal" with geological sequestration of billions of tonnes of CO₂). Hundreds of millions of poor people would be the main victims. Excellent news because this failure clears up illusions that "world civil society" could, via "good governance", in partnership with "stakeholders", arrive at a climate consensus among antagonistic social interests.

It is high time to see that there are only two utterly counterpoised strategies out of fossil fuels: a transition piloted blind by profit and competition which takes us straight into the wall; and a consciously and democratically planned transition based on social and ecological needs, independent of the costs, which means involving the public sector and sharing wealth. This alternative path is the only means of averting disaster.

The Emperor has no clothes. The system is incapable of responding to the gigantic problem it created without inflicting irreparable damage on humanity and nature. To avert this, the time has come for the broadest possible mobilisation. This is everyone's concern. Planetary warming is much more than an "environmental" issue: it is a huge social, economic, human and ecological threat, which objectively requires an ecosocialist alternative. The heart of the matter: capitalism, as a system, has exceeded its limits. Its capacity for social and ecological destruction clearly exceeds its potential for progress. Let this observation help to foster convergence of the struggles for another society. The Copenhagen demonstrators have opened the road. They invite us to join them in taking action: "Act now. Planet, not profit. Nature doesn't compromise".

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