

Global Capitalism and Climate Change

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Global Economy](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

Climate change is occurring with extreme rapidity. Recent news headlines warn us: “Earth Could Warm 11 Degrees by 2100,” “Western Antarctic Ice Sheet Is Collapsing,” and “Climate Change Risks Security and Wars.” — and this is just the beginning.

Had extreme measures been inaugurated worldwide 20 years ago to sharply curtail reliance on fossil fuels, much of what we are now experiencing — unwelcome temperature change, dangerous storms, droughts, floods, etc. — would have been minimized. But to this day Washington is among the tiny minority of countries that have refused to ratify the basic UN document on climate change, the Kyoto Protocol.

The current stage of the climate crisis will afflict our Earth for innumerable generations to come, creating increasing havoc. Stage one will eventually transform to a crueler stage two later this century and other stages eventually unless severe measures are introduced immediately. We know the dire consequences for future generations if we fail to act immediately.

The well-known Canadian scientist and broadcaster David Suzuki got it right when he said on the Bill Moyers PBS program this month:

“Our politicians should be thrown in the slammer for willful blindness.... I think that we are being willfully blind to the consequences for our children and grandchildren. It’s an intergenerational crime.”

Despite the reality of climate change, the major capitalist industrialized countries — most certainly the United States —are moving at a snail’s pace, if moving at all, to mitigate its decimating effects on life on Earth. At issue is whether the capitalist system is willing and able to bring about the immense changes required to prevent climate change from developing into a global catastrophe from mid-to-end century. The evidence so far is that it will not move fast enough.

Virtually all scientists and most concerned people now understand why climate change is happening, and that it will become much worse. Some of them are part a growing mass movement to stop climate change, which we strongly support. But there’s a catch.

At this point, the problem is deeply embedded in a capitalist economic system based upon the relentless exploitation of the Earth and all its resources to obtain super profits that largely accrue to a small minority of people. Capital must be sharply challenged as a system if climate change is to be halted.

Some progress is being made in the conversion from oil, natural gas and coal to solar, hydropower, wind, biomass (biofuel) and geothermal energy, mainly in several smaller social democratic or liberal countries of Europe and elsewhere. But such progress is the exception and is dwarfed by the greenhouse gas emissions of the major industrialized capitalist economies, led by the U.S. and China.

Of these societies, China — now the world's largest annual contributor of CO₂ to the atmosphere — is devoting the greatest amount of resources and money to develop sources of green energy, but the gap between its fossil and renewable fuels is immense. The U.S., which was the principal emitter of CO₂ for well over a hundred years and remains the number one cumulative contributor of poisons in the atmosphere, became number two a few years ago.

Washington lags far behind most major industrial countries in efforts to limit greenhouse emissions. American presidents have known about an impending climate catastrophe at least since the Clinton Administration in the 1990s but have done virtually nothing about it. Given its wealth and powerful status as global hegemon, the United States government under the regimes of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, has been the principal obstacle to concerted global climate action.

President Obama has finally decided after five years to use the powers he already possesses without the need of Congressional approval to implement certain limited beneficial environmental measures, but this is hardly good enough. Now he is even giving hopeful speeches about climate change. But his few insignificant accomplishments are buried by a mountain of missed opportunities and his dedication to drilling for as much oil and fracking for as much gas as possible, turning our country into Saudi America.

As said in mid-May by Paul Jay, the senior editor of The Real News Network: Obama “has a big bully pulpit. He could be rallying the country for a new, green America... but [he's done] next to nothing since he was elected.”

It is convenient to blame the far right and Tea Party know-nothings for America's shameful lethargy in this regard, but that's simply not the main problem. Climate deniers in Congress, exasperating as they are, constitute the farcical sideshow of a much bigger economic and political three-ring circus known as U.S.A. Inc. — the world's largest business/government monopoly. Its run by the wealthiest sector of the population, including the corporate, banking and finance chieftains, and their well-paid minions in business and government, the mass media and other key institutions.

Theoretically, American democracy is a means of organizing a society based first and foremost on an honest electoral system to choose its leaders and hold them responsible. The electoral system is still based on one person, one vote, but it is corrupted absolutely by the power of big money contributions from the multi-millionaires and billionaires in the ruling class. And by seeing to it there are only two viable parties to choose from — both capitalist, one representing the right and far right and the other the center right — the Plutocracy cannot lose, no matter who wins.

Being capitalist, it's also supposed to mean a society where citizens may not be economically equal, but assuredly not as unequal as conditions in the U.S. today. Of all the OECD's major industrial economies America is last in equality. In its quest for ever-greater profits, this ruling class is shredding what remains of that democracy. In the process it has

also fought to lower the income and politically disempower the middle and working classes.

According to economic columnist Eduardo Porter in the May 14, New York Times: “The growing concentration of income can, in fact, make inequality more difficult to correct, as the wealthy bring their wealth to bear on the political process to maintain their privilege. What’s more, disparities in income seem to produce political polarization and gridlock, which tend to favor those who receive a better deal from the prevailing rules.”

What’s this got to do with climate change? Everything. Fossil fuel interests (oil, gas, coal) are major elements of the U.S. economy — so much so that Washington subsidizes this industry with from \$10 billion up to \$52 billion a year (which includes costs of defending pipelines and shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf). Fossil fuel makes its owners, executives and stockholders incredibly rich. All America’s industries and corporations are dependent in one way or another on prevailing energy resources.

Most big corporations and financial interests are wedded to the short-term profit picture, such as a company’s quarterly economic performance charts. Heads roll when profits drop. The fossil fuel industry in particular, and big business in general, fear profits will fall if the U.S. sharply lowers greenhouse gas emissions.

Another factor is that a commitment to reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and to stop the devastation of the ecological system means that the consumption in the richer countries inevitably must be reduced — an utter anathema for capitalism, which is based on continual expansion of demand.

Neither the existing ruling class nor the political system will support the required massive and prompt transition to renewable fuels and the establishment of a sustainable ecological policy to slow down and eventually halt the continual increase in global warming and the decimation of the natural and human environment.

It will take decades of transformation away from fossil fuels and from conspicuous consumption for tangible progress to be made. But only in this way can global warming and ecological disaster be avoided.

In effect, however, the owners of big capital say to this: “No go! Our profits may fall. And we’re certainly not going to tell consumers to cut back on demand! We can make lots of money by adjusting to climate change — building sea walls, retrofitting businesses, schools and other structures to withstand powerful hurricanes or tornadoes, building houses in cooler parts of the country, selling air-conditioners, extracting oil from the Arctic and Antarctic and so on and on. It’s endless. We can finally sell refrigerators to Eskimos! Don’t you realize that adapting to climate change can be an economic boom for big business?”

There are two options confronting the American people: (1) Long-term survival and a revived world for future generations by swiftly replacing fossil fuels to mitigate a potential climate change calamity for the 9.5 billion human beings who will inhabit the increasingly inhospitable world of 2050. (2) The other option, evidently intended to protect the economic status quo and strengthen immediate profits, is to prolong the transition to renewable energy as long as possible, meanwhile focusing on profiting from adaptation to rising temperatures and sea levels and so on.

Working toward a better world required requires a radical solution. There’s a fitting slogan

in parts of the worldwide environmental movement that expresses the real situation: “System Change, Not Climate Change.” The existing capitalist system demonstrably works against the needs of the masses of people, and not only in climate change.

The U.S. economy is in long-term stagnation, kept going by financial bubbles that profit the wealthy and penalize the middle class, working class and poor; joblessness is expected to remain high in future years; 50% of the American people are low income or poor; many young people, saddled with excessive college debts, are often rewarded with substandard jobs and pay; personal privacy of almost any kind is on the way out, now that the NSA knows all and sees all. There’s more — war, racism, sexism, dead-end minimum wage jobs, and so on and on.

It is imperative that a far more powerful environmental movement develops in the next few years to put some effective breaks on greenhouse gas emissions and the despoliation of the land, water and quality of life. It’s time for the various components of the environmental and left political movements, while retaining their identities and missions, to unite in action on the issue of climate change and build the struggle for climate sanity into a powerful political force.

In this connection, it is timely to recall this statement by Hungarian philosopher István Mészáros:

“The uncomfortable truth of the matter is that if there is no future for a radical mass movement in our time... there can be no future for humanity itself.”

The best opportunity we have to end increasing climate change — before high temperatures, air pollution, flooded coastlines, droughts, fierce storms, scarcity of potable water and famine reach disastrous heights — is system change. This is already obvious to much of the left and will become clear to those in the struggle as the crisis increases but the government and business are content to take minimal steps, concentrating more on adaptation than mitigation.

The capitalist industrial world has done much to improve life in the last 200 years (not counting wars, imperialism, colonialism, exploitation and inequality) but now that same economic system’s industrialization is threatening life on Earth. The only alternative system to global capitalism, is 21st century socialism, which has learned a lot from its 150 years of efforts, experiences, trials, errors, and successes.

It took capitalism over 600 years to get to where it is now, including the colonial theft of three-quarters of the world and the degradation of its peoples, hundreds of years of slavery, Jim Crow segregation laws, gross inequality, wage-theft, the subjugation of women, child labor, the holocaust imposed upon Native Americans, two World Wars (including another holocaust), thousands of nuclear weapons ready for the next war, grotesque poverty for over half the 7.2 billion people on Earth today, and predictions of much worse environment changes with each passing decade.

That, they say, is the price of progress. Another price, if we allow it to happen, will be severe climate change for future generations. Actually, capital is proving itself incapable of doing the right thing about three existential matters confronting the world and its people today and in the future: climate change, poverty/inequality, and wars.

Socialism isn't finished because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the development of market economies in some remaining societies. The first chapter of a longer book is over. It's time for socialism's second chapter.

Socialism comes in different varieties but none of them would allow profits to stand in the way of creating a society based on renewable fuels, sustainable development and new ecological, industrial, economic and social policies. It wouldn't tolerate great inequality and poverty. It would do its best to avoid war. In our view the world needs this desperately requires system change, not climate change.

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