

The Climate Crisis and Imperialism

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The outcome of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, which concluded over the weekend in Paris, has been hailed almost universally by politicians and the press as a triumph of international collaboration that will pull mankind back from the brink of ecological disaster.

The *New York Times* called the deal a “historic breakthrough.” The British *Guardian* declared that it demonstrated “just how much can be achieved by determined diplomacy, even while working within the unbending red lines of jealously sovereign states.”

President Obama hailed the deal “an enduring agreement that reduces global carbon pollution and sets the world on a course to a low-carbon future.” He went to say it has “shown that the world has both the will and the ability to take on this challenge.”

Any examination of the agreement, however, makes clear that it is entirely without substance. The “landmark” pact consists of nothing more than a general promise that governments will make an effort to keep any “increase in the global average temperature to well below 2° C above pre-industrial levels,” and will seek to achieve “global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible.”

There are no specific measures mandated for countries that ratify the deal besides a general appeal to be “ambitious” and pursue policies “with the view to achieving the purpose of this Agreement.” There are no specific targets and no enforcement mechanisms, meaning countries that sign the treaty can do whatever they want.

Leading climate scientist James Hansen characterized the deal a “fraud” and a “fake,” declaring, “It’s just worthless words. There is no action, just promises.”

Even if, by some miracle, all of the signatories did their part to achieve the stated goal, global temperatures would still rise by some 2 degrees by the end of the century, a level Hansen calls “highly dangerous.” It would produce a rise in sea levels by several meters, a circumstance that would inundate many of the world’s major metropolises and lead to “hundreds of million[s] of climate refugees.”

Amid the effluvium of official praise for the climate pact, that of French President Francois Hollande stood out as the most ludicrous. Hollande declared,

“The 12th of December 2015 will remain a great date for the planet. In Paris, there have been many revolutions over the centuries. Today it is the most beautiful and the most peaceful revolution that has been just accomplished—a revolution for climate change.”

In reality, what prevails among the leading signatories of the climate deal is not “peaceful revolution,” but violent counterrevolution, or what Lenin called the hallmark of imperialism: “reaction all down the line.” The inability to deal with the enormous danger posed by climate change is one expression of a bankrupt world economic and social order that is hurtling mankind toward catastrophe.

The climate summit took place under siege conditions following the imposition of a three-month state of emergency in the aftermath of the Paris terror attacks. As the leaders of the world’s imperialist powers patted themselves on the back, climate activists in Paris were placed under house arrest and forced to wear ankle bracelets, having been neither tried nor convicted of any crime. Peaceful demonstrators were snatched off the street by plainclothes police, and riot cops converged on groups of protesters, attacking them with pepper spray and batons.

As part of the drive to expand war and domestic repression, the ruling classes of all the imperialist powers have stoked up nationalism and political reaction. The European powers have responded to the influx of people seeking refuge from the sectarian wars ignited by the US and NATO in the Middle East by sealing their borders, building concentration camps and preparing mass deportations, while legitimizing the parties of the extreme right.

On the sidelines of the conference, in between photo-ops and invocations of international peace and collaboration, the leaders of the imperialist powers made plans for carving up Syria. The climate deal was announced in the aftermath of the decision by France, Britain, Germany and the United States to escalate the proxy war in Syria, which has already displaced half the country’s population and killed hundreds of thousands of people.

As the climate summit progressed, the US and its Western allies continued to carry out provocations against Russia, including an agreement to accept Montenegro into NATO. Poland requested that NATO station nuclear weapons on its territory following the downing of a Russian jet by NATO member Turkey last month.

The agreement comes a month after the United States conducted a “freedom of navigation” exercise in which it sent a guided missile destroyer within 12 miles of territory claimed by China, threatening a full-scale military confrontation in the Pacific.

Under conditions where nationalism and war-mongering prevail among the world’s ruling classes, the very idea that an international pact for peace and progress could be brokered by the United Nations is absurd on its face. The UN, an instrument of imperialist policy, is itself now routinely bypassed as the major powers launch wars and invasions without even bothering to seek a UN mandate.

The inability of capitalist society to make any progress toward averting an ecological disaster is an expression of the same contradictions that make it impossible to deal with any of the major crises facing mankind, from war and the refugee crisis to poverty and inequality. The capitalist world order rests on competing nation-states whose basic purpose is to facilitate the enrichment of the financial oligarchy that dominates each country.

The technical means to halt and reverse climate change exist. The problem is not technological, but social and political. The vast resources squandered on the self-enrichment of the world’s billionaire oligarchs and on armaments and military violence must be expropriated and utilized to meet social needs. A halt to climate change depends on rational

and scientific planning carried out on an international basis. This requires putting an end to the subordination of social needs to private profit and the division of the world among rival nation-states.

That means the overthrow of the present social order and its replacement by a socialist society. Only the working class, the only genuinely international social force, is capable of accomplishing this world-historical task, on which the future existence of human civilization depends.

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