

Why UN Climate Agreements Fail

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History will undoubtedly deliver the harshest condemnations of the UN climate talks currently underway in Doha, Qatar. But the conference was laughable before it began; the inept “goals” of the talks stand in tragic-comic opposition to what we already know about climate change — that the climate has already changed in profound ways and its trajectory spells doom for civilization if drastic, coordinated steps are not taken in the immediate future.

For example, the Doha talks began with a shocking dose of reality: the World Meteorological Organization reported to the UN conference that an area of Arctic sea ice bigger than the United States melted in the past year, a rate faster than the most pessimistic scientists imagined only a couple of years ago.

This profound news didn’t manage to get on the front page of any mainstream newspapers or websites in the United States; it was safely tucked away in the back pages, if it was reported at all.

The politicians at the UN climate talks thought the news equally unimpressive; they continued on their previously agreed route of doing absolutely nothing of substance, unmoved from their mutual suicide pact of inaction.

The Associated Press summarized the World Meteorological Organization’s report to the UN:

“... the Arctic ice melt was one of a myriad of extreme and record-breaking weather events to hit the planet in 2012. Droughts devastated nearly two-thirds of the United States as well as western Russia and southern Europe. Floods swamped west Africa and heat waves left much of the Northern Hemisphere sweltering.”

One could also mention Hurricane Sandy, or the ever-increasing ferocity of U.S. wildfires, or the quickly rising acidification of the ocean, not to mention the alarming rise of atmospheric methane levels — a stronger greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide — due to the arctic warming.

A thousand other global examples could easily be given.

We now know that many of these catastrophic weather patterns are due to warmer climates; warm air holds more water than cold air, equaling more droughts for arid climates, and stronger storms and flooding for non-arid climates.

Armed with this knowledge, the Obama administration was once again challenged to join the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty that aims at collective reduction of greenhouse gasses (itself already sadly inadequate to address climate realities). Like Bush before him, Obama has placed the United States as the biggest barrier to climate progress

internationally.

The Associated Press continues:

“A pact [the Kyoto Protocol] that once incorporated all industrialized countries except the United States would now include only the European Union, Australia and several smaller countries which together account for less than 15 per cent of global emissions. And the United States is refusing to offer any bolder commitments to cut its emissions beyond a non-binding pledge to reduce emissions by 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020.”

Thus, the most influential country in the world and largest historic contributor to the current levels of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere will only “commit” to a “non-binding pledge” to reduce greenhouse gasses below levels that will have absolutely no effect on climate change.

Instead of waging a massive campaign to educate the U.S. public about the truly giant investments needed to re-structure the U.S. economy to produce large-scale renewable energy, there is no conversation at all. Not a peep.

Even the once grandiose scheme of free-market capitalism curing the climate disease via investments in green technology has all but ceased. The big profits that rich investors were to make with green technology — while saving the world in the process — have collapsed. Forbes Magazine explains:

“If you need any more evidence how green tech has fallen out of favor with venture capitalists, look no further than the latest data...Overall this year, venture [capitalist] investing in clean tech is on track to drop to the same level as 2009...The Cleantech numbers show how venture capitalists have gotten clobbered in solar and have all but pulled out.”

Obama thought that the green venture capitalists needed just a nudge of government support to get the green profits flowing, so he included billions of giveaways to them in his latest stimulus plan.

But ultimately he proved in painful fashion the limits of a market-based approach to addressing climate change, with the most famous example being the solar panel maker Solyndra, which, after two years of receiving the stimulus money, filed for bankruptcy, taking \$500 million in taxpayer stimulus money with it.

Instead of these invaluable clean technologies being utilized in a massively planned infrastructural apparatus to replace the fossil fuel industry, they are treated like isolated companies trying to turn a profit amid the international market; if they are out-competed by a foreign company, they go bust and simply shut down.

Obama is using the same mentality at the United Nation’s climate talks. He thinks not in terms of how different nations can unite in a planned fashion to fight the already-changed climate, but thinks instead of the United States as a giant corporation fighting competitors abroad. This quip from the New York Times perfectly explains the outlook of U.S. politicians towards international climate treaties:

“...the American political system is not ready to agree to a [climate] treaty that would force the United States, over time, to accept profound changes in its energy [coal, oil, shale gas], transport [trucking, airline, and shipping industries] and manufacturing [corporate] sectors.”

Obama isn't stupid. It's not that he “just doesn't get it.” Quite the contrary, he's acting in a very cunning fashion on behalf of his principal backers: the banks and corporations—the very wealthy who he feels strongest allegiance to.

It's become undeniably clear that U.S. government inaction on climate change is directly linked to the “special interests” of corporations that dominate the government. It's due time that those concerned about our climate draw a similar conclusion.

Our environmental crisis is not caused by some abstract notion of growth that humans in general just can't seem to shake. Capitalistic style growth, however, is built into the system at the ground floor; nothing is produced under capitalism (in the private sector) unless a profit (growth) results; capitalists who don't get a return on their investments (growth) lose their money. This is the holy shrine of growth that cannot be surgically removed from the capitalistic body; the body itself was born ill.

Thus, if renewable energy is not as profitable as oil — and it isn't — then the majority of capitalist investing will continue to go towards destroying the planet. It really is that simple. Even the best-intentioned capitalists do not throw their money away on non-growth investments.

Countless environmentalists have tried to solve the climate issue while keeping capitalism in place, since this is the only “practical” solution. But this approach has failed as the climate has dramatically worsened. It's becoming increasingly obvious to a growing number of people that our economic system itself cannot be reformed to save our environment, regardless of the incentives or other schemes to make it so.

In fact, capitalism internationally has declared war against the public sector — via massive privatization schemes — that destroy what little regulation existed, while environmental agencies are de-funded and run by anti-environment bureaucrats. Capitalism seems to be screaming out its inability to change, except for the worse.

This is also why the Doha climate talks have “less ambitious” goals than the Copenhagen conference before it; we are going in the wrong direction at the same speed that the climate is worsening. There is a direct connection between the reverse direction of the climate talks and the scramble for oil and other raw materials that is leading to war at an alarming rate. Capitalism is in crisis and needs all available resources funneled into the private sector to re-boost profits, to the detriment of the environment.

Addressing climate change will take a monumental — largely unprofitable — effort. The climate talks are indeed going backwards as international competition for markets and raw materials meets in a crescendo, leading to an increasing amount of regional wars.

Ultimately, climate activists must come face to face with political and corporate power. Corporate-owned governments are the ones with the power to adequately address the climate change issue, and they will not be swayed by good science or even a flooded planet.

Those in power only respond to power, and the only power capable of displacing corporate power is when people unite and act collectively, as was done in Egypt, Tunisia, and is still

developing throughout Europe. Replacing our destructive economic system with one not profit-based is the first real step in combating climate change. All other roads lead to a scorched planet.

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Notes

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