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Climate change

Assessing the Paris COP and building on the outcome

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The COP21 in Le Bourget Paris in December 2015 adopted an agreement on global warming and climate change, which was signed by all 195 participating countries. It will come into force in 2020 providing it is ratified by 55 of the signatories that account for at least 55% of global emissions of greenhouse gases—which is expected to happen. How should we assess the significance of the agreement, and where it leaves the struggle against global warming today

It is the first comprehensive agreement after 21 years of meetings and conferences conducted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol applied to just a few countries and was sabotaged by the USA and others. Copenhagen in 2009 broke up in acrimony and emissions were allowed to let rip without any international restriction, legal or political.

Much of the media was euphoric about the deal. The Guardian headline for example announced: “Paris climate deal: nearly 200 nations sign an end of fossil fuel era.” The governments that signed it hailed it as a great victory: as an historic breakthrough that has delivered a framework for the avoidance of catastrophic climate change.

This is clearly not the case. The deal as it stands is totally (catastrophically) inadequate when set against the scale of the task. There is no doubt about that. It would be wrong, however, in my view, to dismiss it as simply a failure—as if nothing positive was achieved. The issue post-Paris is not just whether the deal reached can resolve the issue of climate change (clearly not), but whether there were gains made that can strengthen the struggle against it. Whether gains were made that can improve the terrain on which the struggle takes place. The deal, from this point of view, is deeply contradictory.

An international agreement, of course, is far from the only level that the struggle against global warming and climate change has to be waged. Such an agreement is important, however, in order to set the framework of the struggle at a national level and against the governments of the individual countries. Global warming and the ecological crisis are the ultimate international issues since there is only one atmosphere and only one biosphere.

Gains for the movement

In my view—and this might be controversial on the left [1]—there were indeed significant gains made in Paris, despite huge problems in terms of implementation. If we get this wrong we can disarm the movement.

For the first time, for example, neither the scientific basis of global warming and climate change, or its anthropogenic character, was disputed. The climate skeptics were a non-factor. This is a big change from Copenhagen.

There was also, for the first time, unambiguous recognition, by a COP, of what climate scientists, and climate campaigners, have been saying for many years: that there is a real and urgent threat, from anthropogenic global warming and climate change, that will have catastrophic consequences for hundreds of millions of people if the burning of fossil fuels is not brought to an end.

It is a signal—though one that will be roundly ignored by the fossil fuel industry today—that the end of the era of

fossil fuel is historically in sight.

This is an important point. Kevin Anderson (climate scientist and Professor of energy and climate change at the University of Manchester), who is heavily critical of the deal when it comes to implementation, describes it as a: ‘testament to how assiduous and painstaking science can defeat the unremitting programme of misinformation that is perpetuated by powerful vested interests’. He is right about that. He might have added that it is also a testament to dedicated and determined campaigners, over the years, who have also refused to be silenced on this issue.

Another factor, no doubt, that led to a greater recognition of the realities of global warming in Paris is the increasingly unavoidable consequences of it. The ice caps are shrinking, the sea level is rising, the deserts are expanding, fresh water is become ever more scarce, agriculture is under threat, and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent. A further dimension to this has recently been added with signs of the destabilisation of the vast Western Antarctic ice sheet, the melting of which could raise the sea level by 7m.

Even the most reluctant have had to wake up and face reality – at least to some extent.

As the conference was taking place, towns in the North of England and Scotland were being hit by unprecedented rainfall and devastating floods. Since the deal was signed there have been record-breaking hurricanes in Texas, unprecedented floods in Argentina, and severe droughts in Africa, California and Southern Spain, often with huge bush fires breaking out. Australia has had all three – floods droughts and bush fires.

A long and hard struggle remains (to say the least) but gains were made in Paris that can be built on.

What the climate campaigns say

Mass mobilisations of anti-climate change campaigners took place around the world in the run up to the Paris COP. The demonstration of 70,000 in London on November 29 was the biggest Britain has seen on climate change. Mobilisations and activities took place in Paris during COP itself, and despite the state of emergency imposed under anti-terrorism laws, there was an impressive impromptu march to the Eiffel Tower.

Opinion amongst the campaigning organisations on the outcome of Paris varies. Avaaz called it ‘a landmark goal that can save everything we love!’ though warning of a long struggle ahead. Greenpeace (via spokesperson Yann Arthus-Bertrand) said that: ‘The wheel of climate action turns slowly, but in Paris it has turned. There’s much in this deal that frustrates and disappoints me, but it still puts the fossil fuel industry squarely on the wrong side of history’.

Fossil Free (a campus based campaign for disinvestment) put it this way: “Should we be glad with the agreement reached in Le Bourget? The goals that were set are definitely not enough to keep us within the 1.5 degree global warming, but it is a huge improvement compared to what we had.” Friends of the Earth, on the other hand, said the deal is a sham designed to fleece the poor countries.

George Monbiot, who I don’t always agree with on such assessments, put it very well: “By comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it’s a disaster”. Kevin Anderson made a similar point. He said: “It is the twenty-first century’s equivalent to the victory of heliocentrism over the inquisition. Yet it risks being total fantasy”.

The anti-climate change movement as whole, however, has emerged far more positive from Paris than from Copenhagen after which it virtually collapsed. This reflects not just the more positive outcome but a better thought-through approach by the campaigns in the build up to Paris, which was to prepare for the worst, build the movement, and make plans to continue the struggle at a higher level in 2016 and beyond.

The movement upped its demands

The most important (and surprising) position taken by the COP, in my view, was the decision to set a target for a 1.5°C limit on the global temperature increase. The objective was set of “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.” [Article 2 point a]

This is far more ambitious (more stringent) than expected. Most climate campaigners, particularly outside the countries at the greatest risk, have tended to argue up till now for a 2°C limit. The inadequacy of 2°C was clear but calling for a 1.5°C limit was felt (by many) as difficult to promote given the prevailing level of consciousness on the issue. The world would have to stop burning fossil fuels altogether by 2030 in order to hold to a 1.5°C temperature increase. Now 1.5°C has been adopted by the Paris COP it will be a lot easier to advocate.

It sets a new benchmark against which the struggle to reduce carbon emissions will be measured. The movement has just upped its demands.

Not that 1.5°C was won without a struggle in Paris. In fact it was the direct result of a very determined struggle, throughout the conference, by those countries that will disappear under the waves as a result of a temperature rise in excess of 1.5°C.

A coalition of one hundred countries led by the Marshall Islands, and with the support of Avaaz and others, organised what was termed a High Ambition Coalition in order to coordinate their intervention. Many of these countries have long campaigned around the slogan ‘1.5 to stay alive’ but no one listened.

Non-binding pledges

The big problem (the down side) of the deal is the yawning gap between words and deeds – between aspiration and implementation. This has been widely (and rightly) noted in the movement.

The biggest single problem is that carbon reduction targets are to be ‘achieved’ via non-binding pledges submitted by each country (signaturee) in advance of the COP called ‘Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INCDs)’. The INCDs are to be audited every five years after an initial review in 2018. (The rationale behind the non-binding status of these pledges (for what it is worth) is that since Copenhagen this is the only way to get 195 countries to sign up to a comprehensive agreement.)

The criteria for constructing the INCDs are set out in the preamble to the agreement. They are surprisingly good – as far as they go. They are based – the preamble insists – on ‘the principles of democracy and climate justice’. The INCDs should be constructed, the criteria states, by:

“Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.”

Also by: “Noting the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth, and noting the importance for some of the concept of “climate justice”, when taking action to address climate change.”

It is good that the criteria recognise the integrity of the ecosystems. The problem, however, is not what they say but what they omit—and what they leave dangerously ambiguous.

They have nothing to say, for example, about the methods and technologies that can be used by the signatories to construct their INCDs and achieve their carbon reduction targets. This is left up to the signatories themselves. Many have therefore (unsurprisingly) opted for methods of ‘achieving’ carbon reduction that are the least disruptive to their current wasteful (disastrous) practices rather than the most effective and sustainable.

Rather than opting for energy conservation programmes, cutting out wasteful production, and converting to renewables, many have turned dangerous technologies such as biomass and technical fixes like carbon capture and storage, that don’t even exist in a useable form. No doubt to nuclear will also be high on their lists. There is no mention of carbon trading in the agreement but that does not mean that this will not be used to construct some figures around.

There are other serious problems as well. The target date by which the 1.5°C limit should be met is not made clear other than ‘as soon as possible’ or alternatively ‘in the second half of this century’. Article 4 point 1 puts it this way:

“In order to achieve the long-term temperature goal set out in Article 2, Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties, and to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with best available science, so as to achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century, on the basis of equity, and in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty.”

There is no clear yardstick against which the carbon reductions pledges should be based. Some signatories have pledged to cut emissions ‘compared to business as usual’ whilst others have pledged to cut emissions in terms of carbon intensity—which is the amount of carbon needed to produce the same amount of economic activity. Both of these methods can be used to record carbon reductions that don’t exist.

The agreement explicitly allows countries to count emission reductions made in other countries as a part of their own domestic targets—that are referred to as ‘Internationally Transferred Mitigation Targets’.

It is also far from clear where international transport—air and shipping that are major polluters—comes into all this. How or whether they are included in the national INCDs or whether they will remain un-monitored.

Nor does it, of course, take any account of the logic of the capitalist system with its productivism, its drive for growth,

and its insatiable need for profit.

A 2.7°C temperature increase

The consequences of all this becomes very clear when the effects of the carbon reduction proposals in the INCDs from the 195 participating countries are aggregated—a calculation made by the COP itself. Far from holding the global temperature to a 1.5°C limit, or even a 2°C limit, the aggregate effect of the INCDs submitted adds up to a rise in the global temperature of 2.7°C.

Such a rise would be catastrophic. It would not only lead to the disappearance of many low lying countries and low lying regions under the waves with the displacement of millions of people to join the ranks of the climate refugees but it would trigger dangerous feedback events which would spin global warming out of control.

The answer, in the agreement, to this problem is to call for a progressive tightening of the INCDs as the audits take place. It puts it this way: “much greater emission efforts will be required than those associated with the INCDs in order to hold the increase in the global average temperature to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels by reducing emissions to 40 gigatonnes [of carbon into the atmosphere] or to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels...”

The problem with this, of course, is the signatories themselves. Many of them signed the deal not because they are committed to tackling global warming but because it is becoming increasingly difficult, in terms of world opinion, to avoid signing such a deal. They have little intention of doing anything about the problem if they can possibly avoid it.

This is the case from Putin's Russia to Cameron's Britain, where the Tories were busy cutting subsidies to renewables and vigorously promoting fossil fuels including, shale gas, even as the agreement was being signed.

The global South

Another much disputed issue in Paris was the situation of the impoverished countries of the global South. Countries who pollute the least but are most deprived of climate justice—the principal victims of climate chaos.

As a result of a struggle by such countries the agreement recognises this reality, at least to some extent. It accepts that such countries will need material help if they are to be able to adopt sustainable (non-carbon) models of development and eradicate poverty at the same time. The wealthy countries are consequently ‘strongly urged’ by the agreement to provide \$100bn a year (from 2020) to help them in this. This figure is to be progressively raised in future years.

The agreement consequently: “Resolves to enhance the provision of urgent and adequate finances, technology and capacity building support by developed country Parties in order to enhance the level of ambition of pre-2020 action by Parties, and in this regard strongly urges developed country Parties to scale up their level of financial support, with a concrete roadmap to achieve the goal of jointly providing USD 100bn annually by 2020 for mitigation and adaptation while significantly increasing adaptation finance from current levels and to further provide appropriate technology and capacity building support.”

100bn dollars a year is woefully inadequate, of course, Friends of the Earth are right about that, but it is an important

principle to establish.

A transitional approach

For ecosocialists, and indeed for climate campaigners more generally, the Paris COP was a part of a long hard struggle against climate change and to defend the environment.

The agreement, however, is framed entirely within the parameters of the capitalist system, with its productivism, growth, and drive for profit. It could not be otherwise. The COP was comprised of 195 capitalist governments (194 if we discount Cuba) led by the UN. It was never going to produce the anti-capitalist solution to the climate crisis—based on a social justice and climate justice basis—that is needed. If we judge it (and dismiss it) on that basis we will miss the point.

It is important, in this regard, that we avoid the kind of maximalism that suggests that little or nothing can be done short of overthrowing capitalism and establishing a socialist society. That socialism (or indeed ecosocialism) is the answer.

The issue at stake was not just whether a deal, if reached, would resolve the issue of climate change—would be the ultimate solution. Few, I suspect, expected that it would. The objective for most was to fight for the best deal possible. Hopefully one that would break the deadlock of Copenhagen and include some breakthroughs that would advance the struggle; a deal that would create a new dynamic from which a new round (or stage) of the struggle could be launched. This much, at least, was achieved.

The problem (or contradiction) for the COP and its signatories is that despite the deal being firmly within a capitalist framework, the 1.5°C limit is unachievable under capitalism—short of a dictatorial solution. From this point of view it is a transitional demand. The task for ecosocialists, and indeed for the wider movement, therefore is to demand it's implemented to the full, along with other breakthroughs in the agreement.

Winning the kind of change needed to defend the environment under capitalism is very difficult. It is the most environmentally destructive form of society the world has ever seen, with the possible exception of Stalinism. That does not mean, however, that it cannot be done, or that we can wait for the demise of the system before big changes are made to defend the environment. Time is too short anyway. We have to fight for major changes to defend the environment as a part of the struggle to end capitalism and in preparation for a fully sustainable ecosocialist society.

Building the movement after Paris

The mobilisation for Paris was always about building the movement as well as getting an agreement. It was not just about mobilising for Paris but through Paris and into 2016. This was the stance of the mobilising committee in Paris and also of the organising committee in London that organised the demonstration on November 29.

And it is already happening in Britain. Fossil Free, a campus based divestment campaign, has initiated, along with Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Christian Aid and many more, an international week of action on May 7–15, around the slogan Break Free from Fossil Fuels. It will raise the issue of a just transition to renewables and the need to keep coal, oil and gas in the ground. It will seek to build on the campaigns and battles that have been taking place

around oil pipelines, coal extraction, and fracking sites. The aim will be to demonstrate to the fossil fuel industry that it no longer has the consent of the people.

The struggle in Britain

In Britain the task is to respond to such initiatives, and also to expose and take on the total hypocrisy of the current Tory government in terms of its highly damaging environmental record. Behind Cameron's Paris rhetoric, and that of Amber Rudd—the Tory Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change—the Tories turned their back on even the minimal climate measures previously taken on climate change. They have been aided and abetted in this by having a climate denier as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Tories were paralysed by the devastating floods in the North of England having recent cut the funding both for flood defences and for the Environment Agency. There was plenty of spin but no commitment to significant additional resources.

They have already removed the subsidies from onshore wind and cut solar funding, putting an estimated 30,000 solar industry jobs at risk. They have made renewables liable to the climate change levy, so that clean generation will have to pay more in tax. They are fast-tracking fracking applications and the government is threatening to overrule Lancashire council's decision to refuse Cuadrilla's fracking planning application.

They have scrapped the Green Deal for home insulation, and are cutting the funding for home insulation. They are scrapping the Zero Carbon Homes target—that was supported by house builders as well as environmentalists. They are removing tax incentives to buy less-polluting cars.

At the same time they have massive plans for road building—their £15 billion road-building spree is still going ahead despite austerity. They also have in-principal agreement, under the Davies report, for a new runway in the South East of England. Britain is already unable to meet its carbon emission targets. Building a new runway and propping up an industry that is highly damaging to the environment, that gets huge tax subsidies, and pays no VAT, will make it impossible.

The task for campaigners in Britain post-Paris is to tackle these issues by building the campaigns against climate change at both the domestic and international level as well as the direct actions campaigns around fracking and other issues on the basis of the gains made in Paris.

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[1] For example see Daniel Tanuro's article [COP21: in spite of the show, the glass is 80% empty](#).