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COP 28

Fossil takeover of the COPs

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The presidency of COP28 by the boss of the Emirati oil company (ADNOC, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company) is not an accident, attributable solely to the rotation of countries hosting climate conferences. It reflects a tactical repositioning of the main producers of fossil fuels, oil and gas in particular.

Whether private or public, these large fossil fuel groups have for decades been in a defensive position, imbued more or less explicitly with climate denial. Over the years, they have successively contested global warming itself, its “anthropogenic” origin, the role of CO₂, then the share of CO₂ emissions attributable to coal, oil and gas.

A long taboo

Due to their enormous political influence, the energy capitalists have scored significant points: the major responsibility of fossil fuels is not mentioned in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, Rio 1992) ; nor is it in the Paris Agreement adopted at COP21 (2015). These documents argue for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, not for extracting and burning fewer fossils.

It was not until COP26 (Glasgow, 2021) that the expression “fossil fuels” appeared in the texts. During this COP, an attempt to decide on an exit from coal was rejected at the last minute, and the resolution adopted was only for the reduction of fossils (“phasing down”), not for their abandonment (“phasing out”). In the meantime, the United Nations inventory of policies followed in application of Paris has delivered its verdict: the world is heading straight into the wall, towards a temperature rise of 2.9°C. Will “phasing out” finally take hold? For all fossils or just coal? In any case, resource exploiters are under increasing pressure.

The pressure is rising

Scientists have unmasked the lies of the “merchants of doubt” and defused the schemes to try to discredit their conclusions [\[1\]](#). Social pressure has continued to grow with increasingly frequent and violent disasters. It also gained traction within the ruling class, particularly among insurers. All this has translated at the level of the main governments into a desire to begin something like an “energy transition”. In this context, the old tactic of backward obstruction becomes difficult to maintain.

Energy groups like to present themselves as benefactors who offer humanity heat, light, mobility and development. Continuing to ignore climate issues could seriously damage their brand image. Populations convinced of the fact that these capitalists, with full knowledge of the facts, deliberately sacrificed their living conditions on the altar of profit could demand compensation for the damage, cry for revenge, or even demand the socialization of the energy sector with expropriation of the capitalists.

Obscene profits

The political risk is all the more serious as fossil yields have exploded, mainly thanks to Russian aggression against Ukraine: according to the International Energy Agency, multinationals (including Shell, ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, TotalEnergies) reaped \$4 trillion in profit in 2022 – more than double the average profit of recent years. National airlines are not left out, particularly Saudi Aramco (\$161 billion, up 46 per cent compared to 2021), its little Emirati sister ADNOC (\$24.7 billion, up 27 per cent), Norwegian Equinor (\$151 billion, + 67 per cent) and their peers in other countries (Qatar, Kuwait, etc.).

These astronomical profits become downright obscene when we know that the number of people in the world living without access to electricity increased in 2022 for the first time in twenty years. And this is not about to change: at constant policy, according to the IEA, 660 million human beings will still be without power in 2030, including 550 million in sub-Saharan Africa. All this while the commitment made in 2009 by rich countries to pay one hundred billion dollars per year to the Green Climate Fund from 2020 is still not respected. Climate injustice is the major scandal of our time. It could fuel uprisings, even revolutions.

For companies, it is better to anticipate, adapt to the growing pressure and use it to orient the objectives, means and rhythms of climate policy according to their interests. The strategic objective does not change – to spend as little as possible and prevent any restrictive timetable for the release of fossils, in the short, medium, or even long term if possible. But the tactic is adapting: it is now a matter of positioning itself at the centre of the game by presenting the sector as the main part of the solution rather than as the main source of the problem. Launching a takeover bid for COPs is the mission that the president of ADNOC claims to embody.

Geostrategic ambitions

We will see later the rabbits that al-Jaber pulls out of his hat at the COP to try to preserve the fossil empire. First of all, it is appropriate to consider the fact that the takeover attempt does not come from large American companies and their political representatives (who, on the contrary, are mainly recruited from the ranks of the open climate-denialists): it comes from the United Arab Emirates and, behind it, Saudi Arabia, through their national oil and gas companies.

This is undoubtedly linked to the new geostrategic ambitions of these two states, which are taking advantage of the growing rivalries between the great imperialist powers to advance their own interests. Recent news shows this: the Saudis and Emiratis intend to become independent from the tutelage of Washington. In the climate issue, this is expressed in the care that these two countries – the Kingdom of the Saudis in particular – take to position themselves as spokespersons for the right to development of the “Global South”... of which they are officially part.

Imagine Joe Biden claiming that it is to help the “sustainable development” of the South that the USA is drilling more new oil wells today than under Trump: no one in Latin America would believe it. The same scepticism would reign in Africa if Emmanuel Macron affirmed that TotalEnergies projects in Gabon and Uganda aim for the well-being of people while respecting the environment...

Generally speaking, Western imperialism is deeply discredited in the dominated countries. Putin and Xi Jinping understand this well.

As do the oil sheikhs. Although they swim in insolent fortune, oppress their people and mercilessly pressure the immigrant workers [2] their particular situation makes them, in the eyes of Southern governments, more credible actors in a “realistic”, “serious” and “pragmatic” climate policy, as al-Jaber says. In short: a policy that loosens the purse strings and puts off indefinitely the end of the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels, in the name of the

“right to development” of the poorest countries on the planet.

“Anti-imperialist” demagoguery

It is no coincidence that al-Jaber went out of his way to open the COP with “good news” for the South: contrary to all expectations, negotiations on the effective launch of the fund for “loss and harm” decided in principle at COP26, in Egypt, were successful. Standing applause from the delegates at the summit. In reality, this enthusiasm is misplaced: the World Bank will supervise the fund (as required by the United States), contributions will be voluntary, mostly in the form of loans. A few hundred million dollars were raised immediately. But it is billions, not millions, that the people of the South need, as Rachel Cleetus of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) said.

The manoeuvre of the petro-monarchies is crystal clear: use the legitimate demands of the peoples of the South to protect their empire. To this end, al-Jaber does not hesitate to deploy falsely “anti-imperialist” demagoguery. This is what emerged in his tense exchange with the former president of the Republic of Ireland, former UN special envoy on climate. The COP28 President accused Mary Robinson of believing “lies” from Western media (“your media”) who are making “false accusations” against ADNOC’s investment plans. He accused his interlocutor of wanting “a return to the caves” and challenged her to propose a “fossil exit plan” that was compatible with development. In the end, exasperated, al-Jaber took off the mask: “no science makes the release of fossils a necessary condition for remaining under 1.5°C of warming,” he declared [3].

Fossil Investment Frenzy

In reality, ADNOC's fossil investment plans are very real: according to the US Energy Information Administration, the Emirates plan to increase their oil production by 25 per cent by 2027 [4]. The President of the COP28 contributes ardently to this: according to Climate Reporting, his agenda includes no less than fifteen fossil sales contracts (to China, Germany, Brazil and Egypt, in particular [5]. This is just the tip of the iceberg – all the fossil companies are doing the same. By 2025, the expansion projects of the ten biggest polluters in the fossil fuel sector will add 20 Gt of CO₂, more than five times the annual emissions of European Union countries [6].

This investment frenzy goes completely against scientific consensus. Even the International Energy Agency says it: time is running out, phasing out fossils must begin now. According to the latest report from IPCC Working Group III “reducing GHG emissions across the entire energy sector requires (...) a substantial reduction in overall fossil fuel consumption.” The report specifies the extent: by 2050, the use of coal, oil and gas must decrease by 95%, 60% and 45% respectively (compared to 2019) to have a one in two chance of remaining below 1.5°C [7].

Absurdities

To avoid the axe, the CEO of ADNOC is fully exploiting the idea that it is the reduction in emissions that matters, not the reduction of the use of fossils – we can pollute, it is enough to sweep the CO₂ under the carpet. For example, by injecting captured CO₂ into oil deposits... to increase extraction. Coming to Dubai to support his Emirati colleague, the big boss of ExxonMobil, Darren Woods, said it clearly: there is too much discussion about “the electron solution”. “Carbon capture will play a role. Hydrogen will play a role. Biofuels will play a role. We are good at this. We know how to do it [8].

This is obviously absurd. Let's take the example of capture-sequestration. Except in the cement sector, it is particularly absurd. Even if all the intentions in this area came to fruition and if all the projects became operational, in 2030 we would only capture 0.25 Gt of CO₂, less than one per cent of current global emission [9]. The problem is that this absurdity is not entirely absent from the work of the IPCC.

Responsibility of the IPCC

In the 5th report, which served as the basis for the Paris Agreement, 95 per cent of climate projections included the massive deployment of bioenergy with carbon capture and sequestration (BECCS) [10]. This sorcerer's apprentice technology would consume so much land area that humanity would have to choose: eat or deal the final blow to biodiversity. The 6th report is less enthusiastic about BECCS, but remains focused on capture-sequestration and other similar technologies. In the summary report – a document more politically impactful than the thousands of pages blackened by Working Groups I, II and III – we read this:

Net zero emissions (in 2050) involves moving from fossil fuels without carbon capture and storage (CCS) to carbon-free or very low-carbon energy sources, such as renewable energy or fossil fuels with CCS (...) and removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (CDR) [11].

In this text, 1°) the quantified objectives for fossil reduction cited by the GTIII have disappeared; 2°) the absolute reduction in the use of these fuels is replaced by a formula which combines renewables, fossils with carbon capture-sequestration (CCS) and technologies to remove carbon from the atmosphere (CDR)! The text goes so far as to assert that fossils with capture-sequestration (CCS) constitute a “carbon-free or very low-carbon energy source”, which is a scientific untruth.

“Unabated emissions”

A good part of the COP28 President's proposals are based on this untruth. Al-Jaber let his guard down in the face of Mary Robinson (“no science does the extraction of fossils, etc”...). But it was a slip-up. Usually, he is careful to repeat that we must reduce the “unabated” consumption of fossil fuels “unabated” [12]. Jim Skea, the new president of the IPCC, even gave him his stamp of approval: “I can say that Dr. Sultan was attentive to the science”... [13].

In fact, “unabated fossil fuels” is the formula used by the IPCC to designate fossils exploited without technologies allowing carbon to be removed from the atmosphere. A footnote to the WGIII report gives the following definition:

Fossil fuels without abatement refer to fossil fuels produced and used without interventions (?) making it possible to substantially reduce (?) the quantity of greenhouse gases emitted over the life cycle; for example (sic) capturing 90 per cent or more (of CO₂) from power plants, or 50 to 80 per cent of methane emissions from energy supply. [14].

This is very imprecise – “interventions” are not specified. Furthermore, the “example” of “90 per cent or more capture”

is inconsistent: if the reduction is not 100 per cent, we are not at “net zero”. Even Fatih Birol , the very capitalist boss of the IEA, emphasizes that we must “as a priority do everything possible to stop putting carbon in the atmosphere” [15]. Sultan al-Jaber does exactly the opposite.

Smoke and mirrors

Together, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates took advantage of COP28 to make public the “pact” concluded by 50 fossil companies which undertake to eliminate their emissions (“ abated ”, of course, that is to say with abatement) by 2050. This is a pure smoke and mirrors operation, mounted with the help of McKinsey. Not only is a commitment to 2050 an insult to urgency, but the “pact” only concerns “operational” emissions (directly linked to extraction activity). These represent barely 15 per cent of emissions due to the combustion of fossil fuels! The trick is so obvious that even the financial press is critical [16].

To divert attention from the “phasing out” of fossils, al-Jaber is taking advantage of his role as COP President to push governments to conclude partial commitments on many subjects. These are non-binding declarations of intent... but, carefully relayed to the media, they give the impression that the summit is accumulating successes.

Everything is thrown in : commitments to produce green, blue or grey hydrogen in the Tropics to be exported massively to developed countries [17]. This is neocolonialism at the expense of people, for climate efficiency close to zero: according to a recent survey, 94% per cent of carbon credits generated in equatorial forests correspond to nothing [18]. Will neoliberal ideologues introduce the concept of “notional carbon credits”? Nothing should surprise us anymore in this crazy world where capital, as Marx said, presents everything upside down...

Contracts, contracts...

If Sultan al-Jaber does not follow Fatih Birol on capture-sequestration, he agrees with him on renewable energies. The IEA calls for tripling installed capacities by 2030. The President of COP28 loudly approves. But he has an interest in it, since he manages not only ADNOC but also the Emirati company MASDAR, specializing in green energies. A few days before the summit opened, MASDAR inaugurated the world's largest photovoltaic power plant in the UAE [19].Bingo: at the COP, we sign contracts with all our might [20].

For the Emirati ruling family, COP28 is a gigantic diplomatic-geostrategic-commercial operation. Climate diplomat Alex Scott says: “This COP is even more of a trade fair than those in Glasgow and Sharm -al-Sheik. I don't think all these financiers are here to watch hours of climate negotiations [21] In fact, the summit is completely corrupted by the fossil fuel industry, finance and their lobbyists, present by the thousands even in the state delegations [22].

Will it succeed? Or not?

Will the fossil takeover bid succeed? The Secretary General of the United Nations has thrown a spanner in the works. Twenty-four hours after the release of al-Jaber's proposals, Antonio Guterres declared at the COP platform that these proposals "are clearly not up to what is necessary" because "they say nothing about the elimination of emissions resulting from the consumption of fossil fuels" [23]. But the COPs take their decisions by consensus between capitalist governments, all followers of neoliberal policies, all devoted body and soul to the competitiveness

of an economy which, thirty years after the Rio summit, still depends 80 per cent on fossil fuels. Only one thing is certain: only the struggle of people for an anti-capitalist alternative can stop the catastrophe.

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Translated by *International Viewpoint* from [Gauche Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] In particular, the attempt to discredit the seriousness of their research, just before Copenhagen.

[2] We should remember the thousands of deaths on the World Cup construction sites in Qatar. In the Emirates, immigrant workers worked in temperatures above 42°C on the COP28 site, even in defiance of local legislation.

[3] Watch the video on the site of the *Guardian* – <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/03/back-into-caves-cop28-president-dismisses-phase-out-of-fossil-fuels>

[4] *Le Monde*, 30/11/23

[5] <https://climate-reporting.org/cop28-president-oil-climate/>

[6] Cited by Corporate Europe Observatory in “COP28 push for Hydrogen

[7] IPCC, AR6, WGIII, SPM, C.3.2.

[8] *Financial Times*, 2/12/23

[9] Production Gap Report, <https://productiogap.org> cited on <https://www.desmogblog.com>

[10] According to climatologist Kevin Anderson. See his blog <http://kevinanderson.info/blog>

[11] IPCC, AR6, Synthesis Report, Summary for Policymakers, B.6.3

[12] Sometimes he even says that it is necessary to “phase out fossils” but always “unabated”.

[13] *BBC*, 4/02/23

[14] IPCC, AR6, WGIII, SPM, Footnote 55. Translation DT

[15] <https://www.lea.org/news-the-path-to-limiting-global-warming-to-1-5-c-has-narrowed-but-clean-energy-growth-is-keeping-it-open>

[16] *Financial Times*, 2/12/23

[17] See the excellent analysis of these misleading projects by Corporate Europe] Observatory, op.cit.]; commitment by 22 countries to triple nuclear energy capacities by 2050; commitment of 15 others to move away from coal; commitment of 134 others to include agriculture and food in their climate plans (a promise so vague that it does not even mention the question of meat!); without forgetting, of course, what costs the capitalists the least: protecting existing forests and planting trees to absorb CO 2 .

Climate neocolonialism

In this regard, the Sheikhs are doing very well, since the Emirati company Blue Carbon LLC has acquired for thirty years 10 per cent of the total areas of Liberia, Tanzania, Zambia, and 20 per cent of that of Zimbabwe, or 25 million hectares. Blue Carbon was created barely a year ago by banking on the realization at COP28 of article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which will allow it to sell carbon credits while pocketing 70 per cent of the profits – apparently with a preferential purchasing clause by the Emirates. The governments of African countries have not consulted the populations [[*Le Monde*, 29/11/23

[18] *Guardian*, 18/01/23

[19]

<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/deputy-ruler-of-abu-dhabi-inaugurates-worlds-largest-single-site-solar-plant-ahead-of-cop28-301992276.html>

[20] <https://www.pv-tech.org/masdar-roundup-uae-state-owned-developer-makes-flurry-of-deals-during-cop28/>

[21] *Financial Times*, 1/12/23

[22] See the good article of the RTBF, which gave plenty of space to Pascal Sabido, of the Corporate Europe Observatory.

[23] *Financial Times*, 3/12/23