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Climate Change

Copenhagen: a turning point for the movement

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On Saturday Dec 12, 100,000 demonstrated in the streets of Copenhagen outside the COP 15 summit demanding urgent action against global warming - more than double the numbers that organisers had predicted - or even dared expect. While of course a high percentage of demonstrators came from Denmark itself and from neighbouring countries Sweden and Germany (where there is somewhat of a tradition of mobilising for each other's events) - this was a truly international demonstration.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/nonuclear.jpg>]

Copenhagen demo

One of the biggest delegations from outside Denmark was the 850 strong special train organised by the Belgian organisation, Climate Social Justice, which brought activists not only from Belgium but from France and Britain too in an epic journey which took more than 12 hours each way but facilitated a broader participation - and more international discussion - than would otherwise have been possible.

While the delegations from the countries from the Global South were necessarily smaller than those from the Europe their presence was warmly welcomed - and the popular slogan of Climate Justice Now was clearly seen by most protestors as meaning the leaders of the rich countries needed to listen to the demands of the global south - and was also seen as one of the essential demands of the day.

Indeed the radicality of the slogans which dominated a mobilisation which involved most of the large non-governmental organisations as well as more radical sections of the climate justice movement was noteworthy.

The dominant placards on the march were those distributed by Greenpeace - though they didn't carry that organisations logo - or reflect their politics! The organisation conducted an unusual experiment and asked people to suggest slogans via their website and then produced the most popular. These included: "Nature does not compromise", "There is no planet B", "Bla Bla Bla .. Act now", "Change the Politics not the Climate" and "Climate Justice Now". There were also loud chants led from the platform against the greenwashing of offsetting, while slogans raised by the radical left such as "our planet not your profits" had a warm response well beyond our ranks.

Political parties, trade unions and peasants organisations were also present in this colourful, radical and truly internationalist demonstration through the bitterly cold streets of Copenhagen to the fortress of the Bella Centre where the summit itself was taking place. If the majority of the official negotiators seem to have no answers to the threat of climate chaos, those on the streets have many.

Police repression

The repression of protestors by the police has become a big issue. During Saturdays march, almost 1000 demonstrators were encircled by the police and prevented from moving. Many had to wait up to 5 hours seated directly on the tarmac – hands on the back – before being taken to the detention center. All but a few of those arrested were released without charge within few hours.

Actions by a small group of “Black Block” supporters was used by the police as justification for their action. At the former Stock Exchange and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stones and fire crackers were thrown. But the police

intervention happened almost 1 km further along the route of the demonstration making it completely arbitrary who was in fact detained. The Danish parliament had hastily approved the “Scoundrels act”, a package of new laws that include right for the police to hold people for 12 hours (it was previously 6) in preventive arrest without the right to appear before a judge in the run up to the summit.

People’s climate summit – klimaforum 09

The COP15 has also become the occasion for the convergence of many thousands grassroots activists to debate the challenges and solutions to global warming. The main centre for the debates is the Peoples Climate Summit. A common declaration has been agreed which we print below.

In the same way as the slogans of the demonstration, the declaration also poses a radical approach to climate change, as shown by its title System change – not climate change. It points toward the need for “a just and sustainable transition of our societies to a form that will ensure the rights of life and dignity of all peoples and deliver a more fertile planet and more fulfilling lives to future generations.” It takes a stance against market mechanisms such as carbon trading and offsetting and for atleast a 40% reduction in emmissions by the developed countries by 2020.

Klimaforum 09 - Peoples climate summit : www.klimaforum09.org

The protests – as well as the crack-down by the police and the lack of answers from world leaders have continued since December 12 but smaller numbers of activists have taken part in these direct actions. Not only have more arrests followed, but some from Greenpeace and Via Campesina in particular have had their passes from the Bella Centre withdrawn for attempting to organise acts of solidarity between those inside arguing for binding limits of 1.5% warming – and for climate debt to be paid for by the north – and who walked out of the talks on Tuesday - and the protestors outside.

Inside the Bella Centre, Hugo Chavez from Venezuela has echoed much of what has been raised by the activists and saluted them for being on the streets. “If the climate were a bank, they would have bailed it out already” was one of his most pertinent comments, in a long and powerful speech which drew applause from many who heard it. The Bolivian delegation has also made a strong and powerful intervention from the inside.

But it is what happened on December 12 that sums up the real step change for the movement for Climate Justice. That mobilisation itself was of course proceeded by significant demonstrations in many individual cities and countries across the globe as the summit began on December 5.

But certainly the number of demonstrators on the streets of Copenhagen is a proof positive that it is possible to develop mass mobilisations on the issue of global warming.

Given that it was the largest demonstration on any question in Denmark for more than 20 years, it will undoubtedly give a massive boost to what has been up til now a relatively weak movement on the question of climate change in that country. Other demonstrations on this question have only involved a few hundred people.

But beyond this, at an international level it shows that there is a new movement being born and being radicalised across the globe.

Naomi Klein, in an article for “The Nation” on December 12 entitled “Copenhagen: Seattle Grows Up” makes many comparisons between the movement for climate justice and the battles against free trade symbolised by Seattle and what came after. But she also makes the crucial point that what weakened that movement was that while it was clear what it was against it was less sure what it was for. She is right - Climate Justice activists are clear – there is an alternative and we are determined to build it!