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Climate Change:

Business as usual at Earth Summit

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The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also referred to as the Earth summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 20. Rio+20 was larger, cost more than its predecessor 20 years ago and achieved nothing positive.

The situation facing us in terms climate change is much worse than it was 20 years ago. Carbon emissions have risen by 50% despite the 17 annual international conferences that have taken place within the convention on Climate Change – COP17, which was the latest, took place in Durban South Africa last December.

And while the rest of the world has seen a rise in temperature of 0.7% since 1950, the situation in the arctic is much worse at double that because of various feedback loops. Extreme weather events are becoming more and more frequent across the globe with particularly devastating consequences in the countries of the south – where poverty and lack of infrastructure mean that disease and death are the almost inevitable consequence. While it is scientifically difficult to tie any particular typhoon, tsunami etc. to climate change, there is increasing evidence that the changing patterns can be thus attributed. Instead climate change is having the effect that the gaps between north and south, and those between rich and poor are becoming wider.

Big business uses green washing to profit from concern about the environment. The deepening privatisation of “nature” proposed by the main actors at Rio will increase this trajectory. This is not some unforeseen by-product – it is the search for greater profits that drives this forward.

The fact that key players didn't even pretend to take Rio's supposed goals seriously was apparent from the fact that of 190 countries represented only 130 were represented by their head of state. David Cameron, Angela Merkel and Barack Obama were among those who didn't bother to turn up, prioritising the subsequent G20 summit at Los Cabanos Mexico.

The statement of the Ecosocialist International in advance of the Earth Summit put it like this “The so-called “green economy” – the main proposal of the “Draft Zero,” elaborated by the organizers – is nothing but a greenwashed version of “business as usual,” a “green” fig-leaf hiding the naked ugliness of the existing capitalist market economy, which cannot function without destroying the environment, developing monstrous social inequalities, and moving, with increasing velocity, towards an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions driven by global warming and the resulting climate chaos. “

But the response of George Monbiot (The Guardian June 25) to the predictable failure of Rio+20 was a major mistake. Monbiot, as so often was accurate and incisive in describing the problem – the addiction of governments to consumer capitalism. But his conclusion was profoundly wrong.

He argues that the movement should stop focusing on the need for binding international agreements. Of course, you could say it depends what this means. If the argument is that there are those who have placed too much confidence in the rationality of capitalism and capitalist politicians as distinct from the power of mass action to make the changes we so desperately need – then he is not wrong. But he goes much further than that when he concludes that the movement should go down the road of deep ecology – that our only strategy for the future should be of “rewilding”.

Effectively this is a turn to life style politics and individual solutions which have no answers for the hundreds and thousands of people across the globe – particularly in the country of the south – whose lives are already being destroyed by man-made climate change.

Further such political positions, which have been raised by strands in the green movement for decades often end up siding with other reactionary currents with their view that science per se is anti-ecological – a view which is not only a contradiction in terms but has right wing consequences. Ecosocialism in one country is obviously an even greater illusion than socialism in one country – but again Monbiot's conclusions tend to move us away from international organising while in fact the need has never been greater to link up across the globe.

So it is clear that what is needed is a binding international agreement committed to huge cuts in emissions. Otherwise the tipping point of 2 degrees warming worldwide seems unavoidable. Still worse the Arctic is set to warm by a truly calamitous 3-6 degrees. But to achieve this, we need to defeat neo-liberalism and to transform the international political situation – obviously not a small challenge.

Climate campaigners can take inspiration from some of the positives that happened around Rio+20. There was a 15,000 strong counter summit. There was also the occupation of the Belo Monte dam construction site in the heart of the Amazon. This monster dam, the third largest in the world is on the Xingu river in the Amazonian state of Para, 80% of which will be diverted from its original course if plans go ahead, displacing more than 20,000 people and destroying agricultural land and the fish supply in the river on which the indigenous people depend. A three week occupation of the one of the four sites took place and on August 15 a federal judge ordered suspension of the work until the demands of the local communities were met.

Most significantly in terms of Rio+20 itself, there was the 50,000 strong demonstration calling for economic justice and effective action to save the planet – with a significant participation from trade unions, the landless and indigenous movements.

Campaigners in Britain and across the globe need to strengthen our links. Often those fighting back in the countries of the south have a sharper political analysis – understanding as they organise on the front line both the intersection of different aspects of the environmental crisis and how it relates to the economic disasters of neo-liberal capitalism.

An informal session of the UN convention on climate change is being held in Bangkok at the end of August. Campaigners issued a statement at the beginning of August which included the following statement: The agreements that came out of Cancun (2010) and Durban (2011) have not only moved so far away from getting developed countries to pay for their historical responsibility, they have also moved in the opposite direction of the original goal of addressing climate change and preventing the world descending into climate chaos. Instead, these deals have agreed to such little cuts of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) until 2020, that calculations have shown, this will lead to an increase in the global temperature from 4 to 8 degrees centigrade. Couple this with the disastrous results of Rio+20 that pushes for the “green economy” or a new way of privatizing nature and rebranding capitalism, then, you really have a future too bleak to imagine.