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Climate

COP24: During the disaster, the comedy continues

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The Twenty-Fourth United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP24) has just concluded in Katowice, Poland. Instead of responding to the clear message of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report to take urgent measures to keep warming below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the Conference struggled to set the rules that each state will have to follow to account for its greenhouse gas emissions after 2020. The IPCC report was essentially ignored, the “raising of ambitions” was postponed to a later date and the “developing countries” must be content with vague promises about a Green Climate Fund.

The COP21 in Paris set a course: “stay well below 2°C warming compared to the pre-industrial era while continuing efforts not to exceed 1.5°C.” In the wake of this decision, the IPCC was tasked with drafting a special report on 1.5°C. Last October, this alarming report concluded that humanity has a mere dozen years (as a maximum) to avoid a massive cataclysm, and that significant changes at all levels of society are essential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and end them completely by 2050.

In Katowice, the United States, supported by Russia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, fought to prevent the alarm raised by the scientists being heard by the world's governments. They achieved their goals, inasmuch as COP24 finally confined itself to thanking the IPCC for submitting its report on time. The eight-page statement adopted by the conference does not once allude to the absolute urgency highlighted by the IPCC. While national government climate plans (“Nationally Determined Contributions” – NDCs - in jargon) put into perspective a catastrophic warming of 2.7 to 3.7°C, no state has taken steps to strengthen its commitments. We will see later how to bridge the gap between the words of Paris and the action of governments ... if it is bridged.

Goodbye, differentiated responsibilities

The blind eye turned to the IPCC diagnosis is not the only cause of outrage at this COP. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Rio, 1992) states that global warming is a “common but differentiated responsibility”. It is therefore a question of distributing the efforts because the so-called “developed” countries bear the main historical responsibility for the warming. This clause, fundamental for the countries of the South, has, since the beginning of the negotiations, been in the sights of the rich countries, particularly the United States. However, under the guise of standardized emission accounting procedures, the COP 24 marks a new stage in its progressive re-traction.

COP24 has effectively decided that the CO₂ emissions of a rich country - which could perfectly well immediately stop burning coal to produce electricity - are put on par with those of a poor country - which does not have the financial and technological means to develop green alternatives. This equivalence would certainly be justified if the assistance of the developed countries to the energy transition of the southern countries was real, substantial, unconditional and proportional to the historical responsibilities. But this is not the case. The one hundred billion a year of the “green fund for the climate” promised from 2020 (a sum which is anyway completely insufficient to finance the transition and adaptation) remain mostly a promise on paper, and the rich countries turn a deaf ear when the poorest claim compensation for loss and damage caused to their countries by more violent typhoons and other extreme weather events.

Cynically, those who, like Trump, deny the reality of “anthropogenic” climate change - while they are primarily

responsible for it - do not hesitate to use the “ecological emergency” to stifle issues of social justice. Justice in the North-South relations, obviously, but also in the relations between rich and poor, in the North as in the South. The movement of yellow jackets clearly shows that there is no way out of the climate crisis through a neoliberal policy that makes gifts to the rich in the name of competitiveness, on the one hand, and taxes the poor in the name of the environment, on the other hand. Yet it is this hypocritical and unjust policy that governments want to intensify, in the name of saving the climate. In particular through the introduction (remitted to a subsequent COP) of a global carbon price and a new “market mechanism” to generalize the commodification of ecosystems, with tradable emission rights thrown in.

Growth or climate? Jesus or Barabbas?

At the end of this COP, the comments of most observers oscillate between the image of the glass half full and the glass half empty. They deplore the slowness in the implementation of the “good agreement” of Paris. But this slowness does not stem solely from the Polish Presidency's poor presidency of the COP, its submission to coal interests (COP24 was sponsored by the biggest Euro-pean coal mining company), or the crisis the nasty Trump has opened up in the “multilateral” model of management of international relations. More fundamentally, it stems from the impossibility of solving the climate equation without breaking with the productivist logic of capitalism. So COP21 should be re-examined, to see the dark side of the “good agreement” of Paris.

Saving the climate means stopping growth. To put it simply, it is necessary to produce less and to share more, which capitalism is fundamentally incapable of. In other words, there is a profound antagonism between the solution of the climate crisis, on the one hand, and the capitalist logic of accumulation, on the other. For a quarter of a century, COPs have done nothing but turn around this dilemma: growth or climate? Jesus or Barabbas? The Paris agreement gave the impression that a solution was found, but it was only a statement of intentions, a sleight of hand. Because, behind the scenes, the “good agreement” was underpinned by a crazy and criminal capitalist project: the “temporary exceeding” of the threshold of danger of warming. Barabbas is free, Christ is sacrificed, Pilate is washing his hands.

A scenario of sorcerer's apprentices

The idea is as follows: the 1.5°C bar will be crossed in 2030-2040 - growth for profit requires it! - but “negative emission technologies” and geoengineering will help cool the climate in the second half of the century. Sleep in peace, good people, everything is under control ... Implicit in the Paris agreement, this scenario is now quite explicit in the scientific publications that serve as a basis for climate negotiators – including in the work of the IPCC.

This project of “temporary exceeding” is worthy of sorcerer's apprentices, for at least two reasons: 1) the technologies in question are hypothetical, even dangerous (ecologically and socially), and 2) irreversible disasters – for example, a dislocation of ice caps causing a rise of several metres of the level of the oceans! – could occur during the interval. But the sorcerer's apprentices have the ears of “elites” because their “solution” seems to allow postponing the dilemma of growth to later. Suddenly, it leaves fossil fuel multinationals and the banks that finance them the necessary time to make their huge investments in coal, oil, gas profitable. De facto, the alliance of fossil fuels and finance dictates the pace and forms of the energy transition.

Totally dedicated to the imperatives of profit, competitiveness (between companies, but also between states protecting “their” companies) the negotiators affect to believe that the God of Technology will come to the rescue of their market economy and its corollary: infinite growth. Hence their indifference to the current catastrophe and their enthusiasm, even their sincerity, to (try to make us believe) they have reached a “historic agreement” – once again.

During the disaster, the comedy continues.

Social justice, climate justice: the same struggle

After this COP24, one thing should be crystal clear: there is nothing, absolutely nothing to expect from the governments, from the United Nations, from the Talanoa Dialogue, from the “High Ambition Coalition” and so on. We must abandon radically any illusion about the possibility of convincing all those responsible for the chaos, whoever they are, of the benefits they would incur by “taking leadership” to “raise ambitions” by piloting a “just transition” towards “sustainable development” and so on. They want nothing to do with it, period. All this blah-blah, all this stage management, has one purpose: to put people to sleep, neutralize their thinking, paralyze their organizations. This is the spider's strategy. To collaborate is to throw oneself into the web.

In Belgium, the stalemate of the collaborative strategy of the major environmental associations (and the trade union leaderships that support them) has come to light. Indeed, in the aftermath of the huge climate demonstration in early December (75,000 people in Brussels), the “Climate Coalition” and the “Climate Express” urged that the right-wing government should not fall from power, while Greenpeace begged the king to convince the political class of the climate emergency. Without success, of course. Is it not obvious that this way is a dead end? When all earthly remedies have been exhausted, it will only be left to implore a divine intervention.

This stalemate is in all respects like that into which the trade union leaderships sank at the end of 2014, halting their action plan “to give a chance for consultation”. We know what has become of it: the right-wing government has regained confidence and dismantled, one after the other, many social conquests.

Whether in social or environmental matters, the conclusion is clear: the only message these leaders understand is that of force. It is therefore necessary to build a relationship of forces and, for that, there is only one way: to unite the struggles for climate justice and social justice in an anti-capitalist perspective.

PS:

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