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Environment

The climate justice call echoes across the globe

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Danny Katch and Nicole Colson report on a day of protests on September 21, as people around the world raised their voices in defense of the planet. People filled Central Park West in New York City from 59th Street past 86th Street for the People's Climate March on September 21—a massive crowd estimated to be as large as 300,000, maybe more.

Dozens upon dozens of contingents, representing indigenous activists, unions, students, community organizations, political groups and more, showed the broad range of people who want real action against climate change—before it's too late. For some of the marchers, it was three hours before their part of the demonstration stepped off.

And it wasn't just New York City that was in the streets. The main U.S. protest was one of more than 2,600 events held in over 150 countries on the same day. From India to Tanzania to South Africa to Brazil to Germany and Taiwan, people across the globe raised their voices against ecological destruction.

But this expression of dissent and determination is in stark contrast to the attitude of those who preside over the system that is causing climate change.

The demonstration in New York City was organized to issue a challenge from the streets in the run-up to a United Nations climate summit. Such meetings have been little more than a show—with the world's most powerful governments, in particular the U.S., frustrating attempts to set substantive targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change.

The consequences of putting profits before the fate of the planet are becoming increasingly clear—ever more so by the month.

Meteorologists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced last week that the months of June, July and August marked the hottest summer on record for the planet as a whole. 2014 is on track to break the record for the hottest year, set in 2010.

At a solidarity demonstration held in rural Papua New Guinea, primary school students marched to a lighthouse that has become partially submerged as a result of rising sea levels. In other threatened spots across the Pacific Islands, solidarity marches calling for "Action, Not Words" had a similar message of real urgency.

DESPITE THE grave concerns that mobilized demonstrators, the overall tone of the People's Climate March was celebratory. Many of the protesters pointed to the sheer size of the march as an achievement in itself.

The dozens of contingents spanning the march route connected various local and national struggles with the fight for climate justice across the globe. A section of the march set aside for university students stretched for blocks. Other contingents ranged from Palestinian activists to anti-capitalist and antiwar groups, immigrant groups, and even skiers and snowboarders organized under the slogan "Protect Our Winters."

There was a sizable labor contingent as well, including members of Transport Workers Union Local 100, 1199SEIU

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Healthcare Workers East, the New York State Nurses Association, the Communication Workers of America and many more. This marked an important step for the climate justice movement—and hopefully a shift away from the traditional hostility to environmental issues among sections of the labor movement.

Will Johnson from Louisville, Ky., came to the march as part of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign. He explained that the police killing of Mike Brown and the resulting rebellion in Ferguson, Mo., got him involved in political activism, but he sees a connection between social justice struggles and the fight to stop climate change. "They're turning people who are middle class into the lower class, people who are lower class into the poor, and the poor into God knows what," he said.

Making the connection to Detroit, where the city has shut off water service to many impoverished residents, Johnson added, "How are you going to keep doing stuff that pollutes our air and our water—and then you are making things like our 'free' water no longer free to us. They think we're expendable, but we're all human."

Hundreds of people turned out to march in the "Palestine Bloc," including members of Adalah-NY; the International Socialist Organization; Al-Awda, the Palestine Right to Return Coalition; Students for Justice in Palestine; and Jewish Voice for Peace. As the march progressed, neighboring contingents took up the chants for justice for Palestine, including: "From Detroit to Palestine, stealing water is a crime!"

Hanna Moreia, a medical student, marched with Physicians for a National Health Program, which promotes a single-payer health care system for the U.S. Warning that "climate change is definitely a health care issue," she explained, "More natural disasters means more people showing up in the ER. We're seeing lots of mosquito-borne tropical diseases like Dengue Fever spreading to areas that they haven't been before."

Marching behind Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein's Global Climate Convergence contingent and in front of the ecosocialists of System Change Not Climate Change, the New York state Green Party drew in supporters from across the state for a contingent of nearly 150. Marching among them were Green candidates for governor and lieutenant governor of New York Howie Hawkins and Brian Jones. Their campaign is connecting to the desire for an electoral alternative to the status quo—in order to fight around ecological questions, among many other issues.

Mary Jo Long, who marched with the contingent, stated, "It's great to see a lot of younger people—as someone from the older generation." She explained that she was particularly concerned with opposing fracking for natural gas in New York state.

Lucille, a woman from Fort Greene in Brooklyn who also marched with the New York Greens, said she felt "a strong sense of pride" being on the march. "For the longest time," she said, "the Green Party hasn't been taken seriously—but now with the Hawkins/Jones campaign there's a strong sense that we can make progress as long as we are loud enough."

THE SIZE and scope of the march was impressive and inspiring. But the political tone set by the leading organizers of the demonstration was flawed in important ways.

For one, organizers refused to have the march stand for specific demands—apparently out of fear of alienating more moderate and conservative participants. That left an opening for Democrats to continue to pose as a party concerned about protecting the environment, despite the fact that their pro-corporate agenda has been a main driver of climate

change, both in the U.S. and at an international level.

Even President Barack Obama tweeted his support for the march—the same Barack Obama who, along with his Republican and Democratic predecessors in the Oval Office, has consistently undermined attempts at UN summits to set stricter targets for emissions reduction.

Likewise, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was welcomed to join the march, even though the demonstration was, among other things, a direct protest against the continued inaction of world leaders and the upcoming UN conference.

At the UN summit this week, Obama is expected to highlight supposed "strides" made by the U.S. in tackling climate change. According to Reuters, in advance of the upcoming summit, the White House "unveiled new executive actions and public-private partnerships with major companies to boost the use of renewable energy and target potent greenhouse gases."

Environmental activists, however, say such "partnerships" are simply a way for corporations to put a "green face" on continued pollution and exploitation of natural resources in the name of profit. This proposal is typical for a president who campaigned with the promise that he would protect the environment, but who has pushed for an "all of the above" energy policy that aims to increase extraction of fossil fuels in the U.S., including shale oil refining and fracked natural gas.

On September 16, Obama's Environmental Protection Administration quietly announced it was putting the brakes on one of the most important parts of the Obama administration's "climate plan"—by delaying the implementation of a regulation that would have set new rules cutting carbon pollution from power plants.

This regulation was supposed to be the "signature environmental accomplishment of Obama's second term," according to the Guardian. Instead—like so many other promises from Obama and the Democrats—it has been delayed until after the November election, under pressure from Republicans and industry lobbying groups demanding that the rules be withdrawn or scaled back.

The compromising message of the Democrats came through in speeches from politicians and mainstream environmental groups that were broadcasts on a sound-system on some streets. Among the marchers was New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, fresh off his announcement that he was committing the city to an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050—a fine-sounding goal for which there is no plan, say critics.

ALL THIS highlights the political challenges that must be confronted if the climate justice movement is going to go forward.

But there was ample evidence among the marchers, nevertheless, of what the massive demonstration achieved. Never before has such a wide cross-section of people and organizations come together around the issue of climate change. The relationships built up during the organizing for the demonstration and during the march itself are something to build on for the future.

And the much more radical sentiment that has fired ecological activism over the past several years—in the fight to stop the Keystone XL pipeline for example, or the struggle against fracking, waged against a Democratic president

and Democratic governors in some casesâ€”could be felt all along the march.

It was also evident at events leading up to the People's Climate Marchâ€”particularly the NYC Climate Convergence on September 19-20, organized by System Change Not Climate Change and the Global Climate Convergence. This event drew activists from around the U.S.â€”some 2,500 people registered, and hundreds more attended the numerous meetings, exceeding the expectations of organizationsâ€”to plot a course toward tackling the root cause of climate change: capitalism itself.

Attendance exceeded the expectations of many organizers. In addition to the opening and closing plenaries, which included speakers like Bolivian activist Oscar Olivera, Idle No More's Erica Violet Lee and author Naomi Klein, there were numerous sessions around a variety of topics such as "Race, Class and Climate Change" and "What is Ecosocialism?"

The panel "Water Wars: Cochabamba, Gaza, Detroit" made powerful connections between different struggles that had conference-goers talking afterward. Oscar Olivera, for example, compared the experience of the movement against the privatization of water in Bolivia to the oppression of Palestinians. "Like Israel," he said, "multinationals use control of water to control the people."

A series of meetings highlighted indigenous struggles and gathered activists from across North America. "There are lots of questions about how do we build solidarity, and what's the relationship between folks who are fighting on the frontlines within ancestral territories and reservations and what people can do in the broader community," said activist Ragina Johnson. "But it was very successful and a big step forward for System Change Not Climate Change and the left in general."

More than 50 people turned out for a meeting on "A Green Political Alternative to the Two Parties of Capital" with Green Party candidates Howie Hawkins and Brian Jones and Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant.

Some people were also planning to participate in a September 22 called "Flood Wall Street." Under the slogan "Stop capitalism. End the climate crisis," activists plan to sit in on Wall Street and in other cities to draw attention to the fact that the "economy of the 1 Percent is destroying the planet, flooding our homes and wrecking our communities."

All thisâ€”from the march itself, to the NYC Climate Convergence, and much more besidesâ€”shows the growing determination to fight climate change and the destructive system and institutions that cause it. The mobilization in New York and elsewhere around the world showed that the fight for climate justice is more urgent than everâ€”and more people than ever recognize that.

Julian Guerrero and Sherry Wolf contributed to this article.

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