

An aerial photograph of a dense forest with a large fire burning through it. Bright orange and red flames and thick white smoke are visible, cutting through the green trees. In the bottom right corner, a person with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a red t-shirt, is shown from the waist up, raising their right fist in a gesture of protest or solidarity.

THE GREAT CLIMATE COP OUT

**Why COP26 will not solve
the environmental crisis**

A Socialist Worker pamphlet by Martin Empson

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Forest fires raging in Greece this year

Introduction

World leaders will descend on Glasgow for the COP26 climate summit in November. Delayed a year by the Covid crisis, it is being talked up by politicians and the media as a “last chance” to solve the climate crisis. But, as the name suggests, it is actually the 26th summit in a quarter of a century of failure.

The year 2021 has brought home the terrifying reality of the climate crisis. Flooding, wildfires and hurricanes have hit tens of thousands of people across the world. Huge fires in Greece and Turkey led the news this summer as they destroyed tourist areas—a disaster made worse by the European Union’s (EU) pro-corporate policies.¹

Severe droughts drove up food prices

as crops failed in countries such as Armenia, Turkey and Iran. Kazakhstan, a major exporter of grain, was expecting its crop to be down a quarter this year. On 8 August, the US Fire Centre reported over 39,000 wildfires burning 3.5 million acres.

At the same time—but receiving less media attention than North America—fires in Siberia were bigger than all the other fires in the world combined. Smoke from them was detected at the North Pole for the first time. These disasters represent a social crisis on an enormous scale, one made worse by the nature of capitalism.

The environmental crisis is exacerbated by existing social fault lines—class, gender and race.

In Madagascar, a prolonged drought saw 1.1 million people without food. Aid agencies said it was the first famine

1) See these August 2021 interviews with socialists from Turkey and Greece <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/52208/Their+system+is+the+real+firestarter>

About the author

Martin Empson is a long-standing socialist and environmental activist and the editor of the book *System Change not Climate Change – A Revolutionary Response to Environmental Crisis*.

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caused solely by climate change. However, the famine primarily hit the poorest people on the island who could not afford to buy food.

As Socialist Worker newspaper explained, the parts of Madagascar “most hit by drought and famine have long been marginalised by the central government”. “They lack much of the basic infrastructure of schools, medical facilities and roads,” it wrote.²

Estimates of the number of people who will be displaced as a result of climate change vary dramatically. But the most cited figure suggests that by 2050, there will be 200 million climate refugees fleeing failed harvests, droughts and flooding. Another study estimates that by 2100 some two billion people may be climate refugees.³

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report, published in August, warned of “code red” for humanity. The IPCC said that the worst scenarios for climate change would only be avoided through immediate government action. It is a warning echoed by other international bodies.

In June the United Nations’ World Meteorological Organisation said that “2021 is a make-or-break year for climate action”. “The window to prevent the worst impacts of climate change—which include ever more frequent more intense droughts, floods and storms,” it



There has been a massive growth in environmental activism

warns, is “closing rapidly.”⁴

In 2020 the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reached 417 parts per million, a level not seen since the Pliocene era three to five million years ago.

Then global temperatures were between 1.8 to 3.6 degrees higher than today, and sea levels were some 15 metres higher.

Despite the pandemic, which some hoped might give the environment a breathing space, greenhouse gas emissions continued to rise at almost the same rate as previously. Globally, 2020 tied with 2016 as the warmest year on record—and in Europe it was the hottest year ever.

And 2016 was an El Niño year—one where natural variations in the trade winds cause a periodic warming of the Pacific Ocean. This means that 2020 was as hot as 2016, without this extra warming factor.

Growing awareness of the scale of the climate crisis has caused a massive

growth in environmental activism. In 2019 global climate strikes—inspired by Greta Thunberg’s school strike for the climate—captured a mood. They saw growing numbers of students walk out of school and college to protest.

In September of that year, millions of people across the world joined the school strikers. And, crucially, groups of workers joined the walkouts organised through their trade unions in a way that had not been seen before.

We have also seen the emergence of Extinction Rebellion (XR), a radical network of activists committed to disruptive direct action. In 2019 XR’s Rebellions saw thousands of activists take to the streets, protesting, blockading roads and getting arrested.

As a result of these movements the British government and many institutions such as local councils, government bodies and other organisations declared “climate emergencies”. They committed themselves to action on the environmental crisis—though for most institutions this has not gone beyond an initial statement.

It is in this context that the COP26 conference meets in Glasgow. Politicians such as Boris Johnson are keen to use the summit to polish their green credentials. At a preparatory meeting, he said, “If all that emerges from COP26 is more hot air then we have absolutely no chance of keeping our planet cool.

“It must be a summit of agreement, of action, of deeds not words. For that to happen then over the next six months we must be relentless in our ambition and determination, laying the foundations on

which success will be built.”⁵

He promised that he would be calling on G7 countries to “use their voices and their votes, wherever and whenever possible to support the transition to net zero (carbon emissions)”. And to “kickstart a green industrial revolution, and build economies that withstand whatever our changing climate throws at us”.

The scale of the environmental crisis is immense. Many activists will hope that COP26 will deliver the action we need to avoid catastrophe. Over years, politicians, governments and international organisations have worked hard to paint the COP process as the only solution for the environmental crisis. So it is no surprise that many activists have such hopes, or that some campaigners and NGOs take part in the summits to try and shape the outcome.

But talk of COP26 as the “last chance” for the climate masks reality. The COP process has been a failure. Despite pledges by politicians today—and their predecessors since the 1990s—the environmental crisis has become rapidly and dramatically worse.

A key reason for this is that COP insists that capitalism is the only answer to the crisis. Because the COP process fails to challenge the priorities of the system, it can never be the solution to climate crisis. Without radical alternatives, billions of people face disaster.

This pamphlet explores the failure of COP—and the real solutions we need.

2) <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/52303/Climate+change+and+the+Madagascar+famine>
3) <http://isj.org.uk/migration-climate-catastrophe/>

4) <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news/warming-stripes-show-climate-change-here-and-now>

5) <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-remarks-at-the-petersberg-climate-dialogue-6-may-2021>

Chapter 1

What is COP?

COP26 is the 26th meeting of the Conference of the Parties—the signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The COP summit is the supreme body of the convention, which was an environmental treaty agreed by 154 nations at the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992.

The first COP meeting in Berlin in 1995, decided that previous agreements to stabilise emissions were not robust enough. This led to what is probably the most famous international agreement on climate change emissions—the Kyoto Protocol—at COP3 in Japan, in 1997. The first period of the Kyoto Protocol ran until 2012, when they were amended at a COP meeting in Doha, Qatar. This extended Kyoto until 2020, but also set in motion the process for a new agreement.

While it seems like progress is being made, the process is slow and flawed. For instance, the Doha Agreement was only ratified by the relevant number of countries in October 2020, right at the end of the period it covered. And what it agreed is minimal:

The [Doha] Amendment sets a goal of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 18% compared to 1990 levels for participating countries. This, according to the UNFCCC, “represents an increase from an average reduction of 5% compared



On behalf of corporate America, Obama sabotaged attempts to reduce emissions

to 1990 levels” during the Kyoto Protocol’s first commitment period from 2008-2012.⁶

Doha did make one important decision. For the first time it acknowledged that richer nations, needed to compensate the Global South for climate damage. This “climate debt” is a crucial, and contested, part of international climate debates.

It acknowledges that the Global North has economically benefited through the use of natural resources from the Global South. And that the production of historic greenhouse gas emissions has led to the global warming which is disproportionately hitting the Global South.

Martin Khor is a representative of the South Centre, an organisation that represents 52 countries and seeks to push their common interests on the

⁶ <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/doha-amendment-enters-into-force/>

international stage. At the time, he said that Doha was a positive step forward but “next comes the fight for cash”. The Doha agreement was made despite opposition from the US and the EU.

But before Doha there was an infamous meeting of the COP in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2009. Copenhagen was supposed to agree further emissions cuts that built on those agreed in Kyoto and saw major mobilisations by environmentalists, trade unions, NGOs and the left.

In Britain there was a large demonstration in London called “The Wave” which, as Socialist Worker reported at the time, brought together 50,000 people in a “Blue Sea of protesters”.⁷ There were huge expectations that at Copenhagen there would be a major agreement, making significant

⁷ <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/19455/Massive+climate+Wave+protest+turns+up+the+heat+on+the+government>

steps forward in the battle against climate change. The reality was very different.

After intense debates that focused on the levels of emissions cuts and the differences between commitments from Global North and South countries. The conference looked like it would be deadlocked.

Instead, Barack Obama arrived and announced a new document—the Copenhagen Accord. This had been agreed separately between the US and China, India, Brazil and South Africa. The Accord was “noted” by the COP delegates, even though it was non-binding.

British environmentalist George Monbiot, writing in the Guardian newspaper at the time, blamed Obama for the disaster. “Obama went behind the backs of the UN and most of its member states and assembled a coalition of the willing to strike a deal that outraged the rest of the world,” he said.

“This was then presented to poorer nations without negotiation—either they signed it or they lost the adaptation funds required to help them survive the first few decades of climate breakdown.”

Obama knew he would find it difficult to sell a strong agreement in the US Senate. In the aftermath of the banking crisis, he was also fighting for US dominance in the global economy.

A deal at Copenhagen that would impose binding emissions cuts on the US economy was the opposite to what US capitalists wanted. It was similar in Europe, where governments were pulling back from challenging corporations over

their environmental behaviour.

The Copenhagen Accord made it look like action was agreed, but stripped out any binding commitments to action.

In the aftermath of Copenhagen many politicians and commentators blamed countries such as China and India for the debacle. They claimed that these countries wanted to avoid an agreement so their economic growth was not hampered by emissions reductions.

There is an element of truth to this. But the main villains were Obama and his allies, who used these fears to prevent any legally binding agreement on emissions reductions. After the Copenhagen COP the movement, and the attempts to rebuild international agreements, floundered until Doha.⁸

After Doha, the next, and perhaps most significant climate conference was COP21 in 2015. The Paris Agreement was signed amid much fanfare. For delegates present, it felt like they had moved on from Copenhagen. Activists outside celebrated the huge protests. Together with big solidarity demonstrations around the world, they showed that the climate movement had broken out of its demoralisation after Copenhagen.

There was plenty of post-Paris rhetoric. The UN said that Paris was a “landmark in the multilateral climate change process because, for the first time, a binding agreement brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate

change and adapt to its effects.”⁹

One small step forward was the decision by delegates to agree to limit warming to below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels. And to say that this should “preferably” be kept to 1.5 degrees.

This was a victory for the movement. It was an important demand of the small island nations at the negotiations, and would help to avoid climate tipping points. It was won through a combination of pressure from negotiating blocs from the Global South and small island nations, inside the summit and the big protests outside.

But it had taken over 20 years of negotiations to get a “binding agreement”. And as journalist and activist Naomi Klein pointed out, the Paris agreement did not even mention coal, oil or gas.

At the heart of the Paris Agreement were commitments for ratifying nations to make Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Essentially NDCs are promises by countries of how much they intend to reduce emissions. The problem was that the NDCs pledged at Paris would, according to the UN itself, take the world to 3.2 degrees of warming.¹⁰

Even if countries were to make pledges at the correct levels, the NDCs are not legally binding or enforceable. While Paris was portrayed as a major step forward, the detail of the agreement showed the opposite.

Chapter 2

Why does COP fail?

The reality of the Paris Agreement has been even more disappointing in the years since it was signed. Signatory countries were due to submit updated NDCs in 2020. The independent scientific website Climate Action Tracker, which monitors government action compared to Paris commitments, found that by July 2021 some 94 countries had not updated their targets.

And only 63 countries—62 plus the EU—had submitted new targets. Of these only 15, plus the EU, had submitted stronger targets.¹¹ Remember that these are voluntary targets.

But the problem with COP is not just that countries are unable or unwilling to adhere to strong emission reduction targets. There are much larger issues with how the process works.

COP is not a level playing field. The Global North— particularly the most powerful economies and especially the US—have disproportionate power in the negotiations. By promising cash or applying political pressure, they can influence how other countries behave in the negotiations.

For instance, in the run up to the COP15 conference in Copenhagen, African politicians and negotiators were demanding major action and help for



Illustration: Dugudius

the continent. But by the time of the conference some of these had collapsed into a much softer position. As South African academic and activist Patrick Bond explains, the continent’s main negotiating body the African Union was forced from a “militant position, into capitulation”.

Bond describes how South African president Jacob Zuma and the Ethiopian dictator Meles Zenawi began by declaring their militant opposition to policies that further threatened Africa’s resources and economies. Zenawi even threatened in September 2009 to walk out of negotiations.¹²

But instead, Zenawi flew to the Copenhagen talks via Paris where he met French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Afterwards, Zenawi “announced the halving of Africa’s climate debt demands”.¹³ According to Mithika Mwenda of the Pan-African Climate

8) For more on Copenhagen, and the motivations of the participants see <http://isj.org.uk/climate-politics-after-copenhagen/>

9) <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

10) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1052171>

11) <https://climateactiontracker.org/climate-target-update-tracker/> (accessed July 25 2021)

12) Bond, 2012, p12.

13) Bond, 2012, p124.



Protesters take part in the Global Climate Strike in Cape Town, South Africa

Justice Alliance, this meant “undermining the bold positions of our negotiators and ministers... and threatening the very future of Africa”.

This was so shocking that the G77 group of Global South countries’ lead negotiator, Lumumba Di-Aping from Sudan, was moved to tears. As Bond writes, “Di-Aping first attacked the 2 degrees warming maximum that most rich countries currently consider acceptable.

“Referring continuously to science, in particular parts of the latest IPCC report (which he referenced by page and section) he said that 2°C globally meant 3.5°C for much of Africa. He called global warming of 2 degrees ‘certain death for Africa’, a type of ‘climate fascism’ imposed on Africa by high carbon emitters.

“He said Africa was being asked to sign on to an agreement that would allow

this warming in exchange for \$10 billion, and that Africa was also being asked to ‘celebrate’ this deal. He then went on to forthrightly address the weakness of many African negotiating delegations, noting that many were unprepared and that some members were either lazy or had been ‘bought off’ by the industrialised nations.

“He singled out South Africa, saying that some members of that delegation had actively sought to disrupt the unity of the bloc.”¹⁴

In fact, the promises made to Africa at Copenhagen, led by then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, were empty. In part, this is because they were tied to the free market mechanisms that lie at the heart of COP strategy.

¹⁴) Bond, 2012, p12-13.

What is emissions trading?

Market based solutions to environmental issues have existed, at least in theory, since the 1970s. For instance, in the 1990s, the US instituted a trading scheme to reduce sulphur dioxide pollution.

Emissions Trading Schemes (ETSs) came into their own with Kyoto.

The plan to reduce emissions using trading schemes involves a process known as “cap and trade”. The way an ETS is supposed to work is like this. Emissions from an entity—say an electricity plant that burns coal—are capped at a certain level each year. This level is supposed to be lowered over time, encouraging bosses to reduce emissions.

The owners of the plant are allowed to burn fossil fuels until that cap is reached. Once it is, they must either stop burning coal, or purchase the right to emit more by buying further emission credits or allowances.

These allowances can come from a number of sources. For instance, the owners of another factory that has produced less emissions than expected, might have spare allowances. And it could sell these rights to pollute to the electricity plant’s owners.

Other credits can be created—for instance, a company or country might

promise to plant trees that can absorb a certain amount of carbon over time. This planting would generate credits which can then be sold to companies that want to pollute.

These schemes sound fine in principle. But they have a number of flaws. ETSs don’t necessarily lead to emissions reductions.

For instance, Lohmann describes a case where giant industrial pig farms in Mexico, owned by a US multinational, earn “extra revenue by capturing the methane given off by the huge volumes of pig excrement they produce and burning it, and then selling the resulting carbon credits to Cargill International and EcoSecurities.”¹

Over long periods of time methane can warm the Earth much more than carbon dioxide—around 28 times more over a century. Because these farms can burn methane and produce carbon dioxide, they can still claim to be reducing levels of warming, which qualifies them for carbon credits.

With potential profits from ETSs being very high, there is an incentive to produce more pollution. A company might have a production process that produces a dangerous

chemical, which they can destroy to create credits.

So there is a financial incentive to continue producing the chemical, rather than stopping altogether. Some companies even find that they have made more money from selling carbon credits than from their core production.

Finally, ETSs are part of the wider capitalist market. Huge “derivative” financial schemes have been created based on the buying and selling of carbon credits.

These markets then become subject to the whims of the global financial system. In January 2013 the European ETS saw the price of carbon fall to a record low. Low prices mean there is little incentive to reduce pollution.

Interestingly the 2013 crash in price, was linked to the EU decision not to release further credits. In other words, the EU was limiting the supply of “rights to pollute”, which scared investors who wanted more credits to buy and sell.

The initial phase of the European ETS was bedevilled because the number of credits issued was too high, reducing the price of carbon, and essentially allowing continued pollution.

Ultimately, we cannot solve environmental problems by trying to recast them as part of the capitalist market.

¹) Lohmann, Larry, *The Endless Algebra of Climate Markets*, in Bond, 2011, p193.

Voices from the Global South

“Historically, the Global North has accounted for the bulk of the accumulated carbon in the atmosphere. And within countries, the carbon contribution of the rich per capita is so much greater than that of the poor.

“The inequality of wealth is paralleled by the inequality in carbon emissions. The richer you are, the more carbon you fart. In that sense, to say that the climate crisis is a problem created by “all of humanity” is incorrect.

“The better formulation is that all of humanity is responsible for taking collective action to address the climate crisis. Our responsibility is taking the political action to force both the Global North and the rich in the South to stop behaving in the same old climate-damaging ways.”

Walden Bello
Philippines



New Delhi, India

“Ordinary people are battling hard to get one meal a day, and for most that takes precedence.

“The frequent hikes in the price of basic goods and services such as water, electricity, hospital fees and food has further exacerbated the matter. So climate change appears to the ordinary person as a simple proposition.

“Either way we will die, so we’d rather place food on the table and leave the fight against global climate change to the elites. This is particularly disheartening because while the elites are the trigger for climatic change, women and girls continue to bear the brunt of it.

“From gathering firewood, to tilling the ground for cultivation of crops, all the way to caring for the sick in the family due to malnutrition

or new diseases.

“This work is generally done by women. And, after all the hustling, women and girls pay the price. It’s seen in poor health facilities, no sustainable pension, in some cases a fragmented family unit and no place to call home.

“Climate change is an effect of capitalism, the commodification of all goods and services and disregard for the environment. It confronts both the rich and poor to various degrees. But the sad reality is that the ordinary citizen, the working class, the poor and the peasants pay the biggest price.”

Laura Musanga
International
Socialist
Organisation,
Zimbabwe

“Deforestation is one of the reasons for desertification in the northern states. More than 14 percent of Nigerian primary forest has been lost in the past eight years.

“According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the country has the highest rate of deforestation in the world. This is driven by timber export, logging, construction, and subsistence agriculture. Our government’s response to climate change has been a sham.

“It has failed to make oil companies stop gas flaring—despite setting a deadline six times. Flaring, burning off excess gas created by oil extraction, is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

“Instead the state organises behavioural change campaigns demanding rural communities stop using wood for fuel. But these drives fail to address the poverty behind this use.”

Baba Aye
Socialist Workers
League, Nigeria

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bit.ly/SWGlobalSouth



Cape Town, South Africa

“In recent years climate movements across South Africa have grown and even started to embed themselves in working class communities.

“These movements have been at the forefront of organising protests and agitating for a just and socially owned renewable energy system...

“However, the Achilles heel facing the movements has been the building of solidarity between communities and workers’ struggles. Already the impact of climate change is being felt by people who have no access to food.

“This is because of the

levels of poverty caused by the destruction of the environment. The recent IPCC report is right to sound the alarm bell for immediate transformation of our society and economies.

“But by pinning the blame on human activity as responsible for global warming, the report is shifting the blame from the current economic system. It is this capitalism that is no longer sustainable, just as Eskom is no longer sustainable.”

Lebogang Malebo
Keep Left,
South Africa

Chapter 3

COP's capitalist friendly solutions

The main reason that COP has failed is that its principal strategy cannot work—because it is based on economics rooted in the logic of capitalism.

The solutions offered by the capitalist ruling class to environmental issues involve some form of emissions trading schemes or carbon offsetting (see pages 16-17).

Larry Lohmann of the Corner House institute has been a longstanding critic of market mechanisms as environmental solutions. He explains, “Carbon markets are a particularly disastrous example of what can happen when the cluster of processes commonly associated with neoliberalism is let loose on environmental crises.”¹⁵

Emissions trading schemes are presented as a way of allowing the market to solve environmental problems. They are predicated on the idea that natural resources—land, air, forests, water— can be turned into commodities. It is the privatisation of nature.

Unfortunately, the biggest problem with these schemes is that there is no evidence that they work. Though they have made vast profits for a

small number of carbon traders and corporations.

Such schemes link environmental issues to the profit-driven market, and place corporate interests at the heart of climate solutions. These corporations are more interested in profits than dealing with climate change. Even if carbon trading could work on the required scale, time is too short.

Governments need to shut down and replace fossil fuel infrastructure with renewable energy and stop the development of new sources of fossil fuels within a few years. The free markets offered by the COP process and supported by the major economic powers cannot do this.

Supporters of emissions trading schemes can point to some success in the 2000s. But Lohmann noted, “The industrial slowdown resulting from the financial crisis of 2008, for instance, resulted in more CO₂ emission reductions than all the world’s climate markets put together had achieved... yet has not changed structural dependence

on fossil fuels.”¹⁶

COP meetings are never short of corporate influence. Previous COPs had embarrassing sponsorship from corporations that have every interest in opposing serious action on climate change.

In Poland in 2018, COP24 was sponsored by the energy company Tauron, the coal company Jastrzębska Spółka Węglowa and other energy, mining and banking corporations all with enormous stakes in the fossil fuel industry.

The 2019 COP25 negotiations in Spain included sponsors like Endesa, an energy company described as Spain’s largest polluter. Other sponsors included energy companies and banks such as BBVA, which helped fund the Dakota Access Pipeline.

At nearly 1,900 kilometres in length, this pipeline was built to bring oil from North Dakota tar sands to a terminal in Illinois. The pipeline’s environmental impact was huge, and crossed many sites of importance to Native Americans. Tens of thousands of people protested against it being built, but it was finally completed at the order of Donald Trump.

There are no explicit fossil fuel extraction companies backing the Glasgow COP. But sponsors that have already been announced include NatWest bank, which has billions invested in fossil fuel companies, Scottish Power and SSE Thermal (who own Peterhead Power Station—Scotland’s largest emitter of CO₂).

Chapter 4

Climate debt

In addition to the structural problems with COP, there is a further problem. This is the way that COP, dominated by the richer nations, has neglected and ignored the question of “climate debt”. This debt was finally acknowledged at the Doha COP in 2012. However, there seems little desire to solve the problem.

With the COP taking place in Glasgow in November 2021, there ought to be a spotlight on Britain’s “climate debt”. Britain was the first country to undergo the Industrial Revolution. This was built on the burning of coal in steam engines, which drove manufacturing plants, railways and steam ships. Britain’s colonial expansion brought huge areas of the world under its control.

The slave trade saw the violent transportation of millions of Africans to the Americas where their forced labour helped make Britain the richest power in the world. British capitalism also needed raw materials, and sucked in natural resources such as cotton, gold, coal, wood, fish and animal furs from around the world.

British economic power developed on the back of the destruction of indigenous communities, African societies and global ecology. This is in part why Britain is responsible for around 4.7 percent of historic emissions. These emissions now make a significant contribution to the environmental crisis which is predominately hitting the Global South.



15) Lohmann, Larry, *The Endless Algebra of Climate Markets*, in Bond, 2011, p202.

16) Lohmann, Larry, *The Endless Algebra of Climate Markets*, in Bond, 2011, p195.



The British empire ravaged much of the world

Britain's historic development has driven climate crisis and underdeveloped the economies of countries in the Global South. This undermined their ability to deal with the effects of a climate crisis that is already unfolding rapidly. Britain is not the only culprit.

The US is responsible for 25 percent of historic emissions, with the 28 countries of the EU responsible for 22 percent. China is responsible for about 13 percent of historic emissions.¹⁷ But China's figures hide a further inequality.

In their quest to maximise profits, many manufacturers in the Global North have moved production to countries with lower wages. So emissions have been outsourced. Britain is now the "G7's biggest net importer of CO₂ emissions".¹⁸

COP acknowledges the existence of this climate debt. But progress in paying

it has been limited. The Copenhagen Accords pledged \$100 billion per year to the Global South. This figure has been repeatedly reaffirmed, yet most of the money is not forthcoming.

There are arguments about where it should come from—the original plan was a mixture of public and private money. Many negotiators from the Global North hoped that the money will be paid through refinancing debt or cancelling loans.

If there is to be climate justice for billions of people in the Global South, this money needs to be made available urgently. And it needs to be in the form of real cash—not accounting sleights of hand.

But prospects are not great. In July 2021, in the midst of a global pandemic and with mounting climate related emergencies, Britain slashed its budget for overseas aid. As we demonstrate at COP26, climate activists must insist on the wealthy north paying off its historic debt in order to get climate justice.

Chapter 5 The climate politics we need

The year 2019 saw the emergence of an inspirational new climate movement. It seemed to explode onto the streets out of nowhere, but had deep roots.

The COP process has seen protests and demonstrations over many years. On two occasions—during the Copenhagen and Paris COPs—global protest movements took place on a massive scale.

In Paris in 2015, thousands of protesters defied a police ban on demonstrations. The ban had been put in place following earlier terrorist attacks. But as Socialist Worker reported at the time, "Hundreds of thousands had been set to march for action on climate change.

"But French president François Hollande called a state of emergency and banned all protests in the region. The police ramped up repression. First they raided activists and placed 28 under a form of house arrest, then "advised" citizens to avoid leaving their homes on the day.

"Yet the streets were full of people. Demonstrations took place in other cities around France. And the NGOs and trade unions that had called the demonstration looked for other

ways to mobilise. In the morning thousands of people gave their shoes to the Avaaz NGO to "march in our place" in a symbolic display at Place de la Republique.

"Next, organisers say 10,000 people joined a human chain along what would have been the demonstration's route. "Change the system—not the climate" was one of the most popular slogans."¹⁹

There were also huge demonstrations across the world, including a 70,000-strong People's March for Climate, Justice and Jobs in London.

Such demonstrations during COP are important as they can pressure the negotiators for stronger action. More importantly, they can develop links between movements that can organise between COPs over local, regional and international issues.

This is not automatic. In the aftermath of the Copenhagen COP—after Obama rammed through his own agenda—the environmental movement was demoralised for several years. That demoralisation arose out of a misplaced hope that the Copenhagen COP would bring about real change.

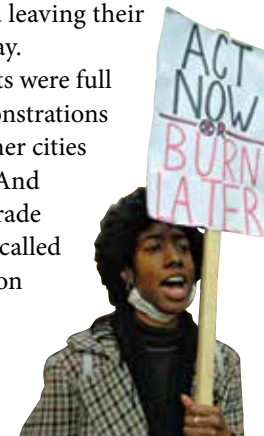
If we are to build a longer-term climate movement and fight for climate justice and a sustainable society, we need to have a different set of politics.

Firstly, we need to understand that the COP process is part of the capitalist system. COP, in and of itself, will never challenge the priorities of capitalism.

When reporting on the disastrous way

¹⁹ <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/41805/Paris+talks+greeted+by+opposition+on+the+streets>

¹⁷ <https://ourworldindata.org/contributed-most-global-co2>
¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/oct/21/britain-is-g7s-biggest-net-importer-of-co2-emissions-per-capita-says-ons>



What's wrong with 'net zero' and carbon offsetting?

Net Zero” has become politicians’ choice phrase. Biden set the US a target of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. When Biden and other politicians talk about net zero, they don’t really mean reducing emissions to zero. They mean continuing with some or all of their emissions, but cancelling them out or offsetting them.

We usually encounter offsetting when we buy some goods or services and are offered the option to offset the emissions caused by the purchase.

For example, many airlines offer passengers the opportunity to pay a few extra pounds and offset their carbon emissions. On a grander scale companies can offset emissions by paying for a supposed carbon reducing service elsewhere.

Unfortunately, as Friends of the Earth (FoE) have said, carbon offsetting doesn’t work in most cases. “It’s a con,” they say. FoE quote a European Commission study into “United Nations-

sanctioned offset projects”. This came to the conclusion that “three quarters of projects were unlikely to have resulted in additional emissions reductions (meaning they would have probably gone ahead anyway) and only 2 per cent had a high likelihood of being classed as ‘additional’.”¹

There are many potential problems with offsetting. For instance, planting trees is a common offsetting choice.

Superficially, this should work—a tree absorbs carbon over its lifetime from the atmosphere.

But it might take many years for the trees planted to absorb the carbon they are supposed to offset, and in the meantime the emitted carbon is warming the Earth.

Forests can burn down, or trees can die early—both more likely to happen on a hotter planet—and when this happens they stop absorbing carbon, which is then released as the tree

1) <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/climate/does-carbon-offsetting-work>



decomposes or is burnt.

Tree plantations are associated with reduced biodiversity and offsetting plantation schemes can even be linked to the destruction of indigenous lands and the displacement of communities.

There is an additional problem with offsetting. Because most pollution originates with the Global North, offsetting schemes are designed to allow their companies to continue as normal.

This is done by trying to

cancel out their pollution by paying poorer countries to offset the problem. This process can worsen environmental and social problems elsewhere.

Patrick Bond gives the example of Bisasar Road landfill, which built in 1980 during South African Apartheid on a nature reserve in an Indian neighbourhood of Durban.

Years of campaigning followed against the landfill by local residents, who suffered the stink and health problems such as “asthma,

sinusitis, pneumonia and even tuberculosis”. The area was also identified as a cancer “hotspot”.

The African National Congress (ANC), which led the fight against Apartheid, promised that it would close the landfill.

But in the 2000s the South African ANC government allowed the landfill to continue. This was because of the money that could be earned selling carbon credits associated with the burning of methane from the rubbish. The proposal to create the Bisasar Road Clean Development Mechanism came, initially, with a promise of \$14.4 million grant from the World Bank.²

Today the landfill is supposed to no longer take rubbish as the site is full, but it continues to be a site for refuse pickers and “informal dumping” and the burning of methane.³

The health effects on black

2) Bond, 2012, p168-173.

3) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-environment-climate-change-ci-idUSKNC2CZ053>

and Indian communities in the area were ignored in favour of generating profits.

Those who call for net zero are usually guilty of perpetuating a myth. It is an economic sleight-of-hand that obscures the ongoing climate crisis—which also risks perpetuating social and environmental injustices on the poorest communities around the world.

Instead, we should demand immediate, large-scale, cuts to emissions by leaving fossil fuels in the ground and transitioning energy use to zero carbon alternatives.

Real net zero will be achieved through the reduction of emissions to levels where the earth’s natural capacity can absorb greenhouse gases.



that Obama forced through his agenda at COP26, environmental campaigner Bill McKibben wrote his message was, “You poor nations can spout off all you want on questions like human rights or the role of women or fighting polio or handling refugees.

“But when you get too close to the things that count —the fossil fuel that’s at the center of our economy— you can forget about it. We’re not interested. You’re a bother, and when you sink beneath the waves we don’t want to hear much about it.

“The dearest hope of the American right for fifty years was essentially realised because in the end coal is at the center of America’s economy.”²⁰

In other words, any real challenge to the workings of capitalism would be shut down by the most powerful economies in the world. There is no reason to believe that Joe Biden will be any different at COP26. The White House statement on his April 2021 Leaders’ Summit on Climate explains his agenda for COP.

It says, “The United States is leading the way with a range of bold new commitments across the federal government that demonstrate its leadership, create jobs, rally the rest of the world to step up, mobilise finance, spur transformational innovations, conserve nature, build resilience, strengthen adaptation and drive economic growth for communities.”²¹

20) <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2009/12/copenhagen-obama-guts-progressive-values/>
21) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/23/fact-sheet-president-bidens-leaders-summit-on-climate/>



Fossil fuels are central to the capitalist economy

There is nothing here about fundamentally challenging the fossil fuel economy. But this is no surprise. During Biden’s election campaign, when Donald Trump used 18,000 fracking jobs in the state of Pennsylvania as an election issue, Biden refused to say he would ban fracking. Instead, he committed himself to stopping fracking only on federal land. But 90 percent of fracking in the US takes place on non-federal land.

So Biden’s promise simply sent a message to the fossil fuel and fracking companies that they could rest easy under a Democrat administration. Rather than offering fracking workers a sustainable, alternative to the fossil fuel industry, he ducked the issue in the interest of fossil capital.

Biden’s statement contains no less

than 18 references to “net-zero”, and much emphasis on new technology as a solution (see pages 20-21). These technologies will mean “enormous new economic opportunities to build the industries of the future”.

Biden echoes the arguments of billionaire Bill Gates whose recent book argued that climate change was “a huge economic opportunity”. Both want to see solutions to environmental crisis that allow capitalist accumulation to continue, or offer new opportunities to make money.

To explain why these solutions are false ones, requires understanding how the system operates.

Capitalism is a



system based on the exploitation of human labour to make profits.

Its historic development has seen the adoption of fossil fuels to provide the energy for the system to run. The use of coal, gas and oil, was no accident—it was the result of decisions by capitalists trying to find ways to maximise the exploitation of labour.

But capitalism is not simply destructive to the environment because it burns fossil fuels and degrades natural resources. The root cause of capitalism’s ongoing environmental damage is because it is a system based on endless growth.

Capitalists have to constantly expand in order to avoid going under because they are locked into competition with one another. This expansion requires more resources and more fuels.

As the revolutionary Karl Marx explained, the capitalists cannot break from this logic. “Accumulation for accumulation’s sake, production for production’s sake—by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie,” he wrote. The process is a self-fulfilling one—“The more the capitalist has accumulated, the more is he able to accumulate.”²² And he noted that this required the “universal appropriation of nature.”²³

Capitalism is a system fueled by competition between individual corporations and governments. There will be no serious action on carbon emissions because it is not in the interest

22) Karl Marx, Capital, volume 1, chapter 24. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch24.htm>

23) Karl Marx, Grundrisse (London: Penguin, 1977), 410

False solutions – technology and geoengineering

Pro-corporate politicians and billionaires, such as Biden and Gates, propose another set of solutions alongside market mechanisms. These answers rely on the use of technology to deal with climate change.

Socialists do not reject new technology. We know that, for instance, instead of fossil fuel generation we need renewable energy.

This will require the construction of mass numbers of wind turbines, solar plants and tidal barrages. And making transport zero carbon will require a switch to electric vehicles, charged from renewable energy.

But in the hands of the capitalists, technological solutions are a way of maintaining the status quo.

Electric cars offer the best example of this. In recent years, car manufacturers have moved to build large numbers of electric and hybrid cars. But the world does not need more cars.

Car companies parade their electric vehicles because they want to continue their way of making profits. But the model of individual car ownership is a recipe for more congestion, more deaths on roads and continued unsustainable use of natural resources.



Capitalists hope a technical 'fix' will allow them to continue with business as usual

We need a societal switch to public transport—which means the expansion and improvement of rail, trams, buses and coaches powered by renewable energy. Locally, we need to encourage walking and cycling as zero carbon forms of transport.

For the capitalists, new technology is always about continuing capital accumulation or finding new sources of profit.

As Bill Gates said in his recent book, “The countries that build great zero-carbon

companies and industries will be the ones to lead the global economy in the coming decades.”

We are often led to believe that renewable energy is still in development. It is true that renewable technology is continuously being improved, but wind, solar and tidal energy is already good enough to power the world.

In 2009, in the Scientific American journal, scientists Mark Jacobson and Mark Delucchi showed how wind, water and solar energy could provide energy for “all purposes” by 2030.¹

Since then, they have built on this work to show how the world could power homes,

work places, transportation and even agriculture from renewables, eliminating needs for nuclear power and fossil fuels.²

The barrier to transitioning from a fossil fuel economy to a renewable one is not technological—it is political and economic.

It is the vested interests of capital that prevent action. This is why oil companies have funded climate denial over the decades, and blocked attempts to move to zero carbon solutions.

Naomi Klein has pointed out that in 2013, oil and gas companies, spent \$400,000 every day lobbying the US Congress.³

Technology can also have significant environmental impact. Nuclear power, for instance, is frequently described as being zero carbon. However, its environmental impacts are significant.

The industry produces vast quantities of waste that has to be stored safely, which together with the mining, transport and storage of fuel and waste produces pollution and uses energy.

Nuclear power also has unique problems associated with accidents, which can threaten the lives of thousands of people and potentially render whole regions uninhabitable.

Batteries for electric cars require rare minerals. Cobalt, for instance, comes mostly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where it is linked to human rights abuses, child labour and environmental destruction.

Social and environmental movements must fight to ensure that new technology does not further exacerbate inequality and environmental destruction as the capitalists rush to make profits.

Some bosses and scientists have suggested we can geo-engineer our way out of the climate crisis. This usually means changing some aspect of the environment to encourage carbon absorption from the atmosphere, or block the heat from the sun reaching the surface.

These technologies are extremely costly and many environmental scientists warn that they can have unforeseen problems.

The chemicals added to the environment to do one thing—such as encourage absorption of carbon dioxide—might also act as pollutants or disturb

other natural systems.

The resources and money used to develop and deploy new technologies could take materials and investment away from existing solutions.⁴

Geoengineering is exciting for some capitalists because they hope it will allow them to continue with business as usual.

But geoengineering, on the scale required to cancel out global warming, will require vast injections of chemicals into the environment or massive use of technology. It will do nothing to reduce emissions, or prevent the burning of fossil fuels.

This focus on technological solutions to climate change has nothing to do with stopping environmental disaster. It is all about allowing the capitalists to continue to make their profits.

Solving the climate crisis means challenging corporate destruction of the environment in the name of profits. And that means we must reject false solutions that seek to allow them to continue.

4) Technology as an answer to environmental crisis does not just come from the capitalists. It has its supporters on the left. I recommend John Bellamy Foster’s detailed critique of these “ecomodernist” solutions from Nov 2017. <https://monthlyreview.org/2017/11/01/the-long-ecological-revolution/>



1) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-path-to-sustainable-energy-by-2030/>

2) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/139-countries-could-get-all-of-their-power-from-renewable-sources1/>
3) Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, Allen Lane, 2014, p149.



Students join the Global Climate March in San Francisco

of each individual entity to do so.

So in order to deal with the environmental crises that we are experiencing today, we need to take on the system itself. This means building movements that can demand radical action from governments, but also challenge the systems' priorities.

In the short term, we should raise demands that will begin the transition to a zero carbon economy. For instance, the Campaign against Climate Change has produced a number of reports showing how the creation of millions of "climate jobs" would enable this to happen.²⁴

We need a rapid shift in all sectors of our economy—building, transport,

agriculture, energy generation and housing, to zero carbon. Environmental activists, together with socialists and trade unionists need to place workers' demands at the heart of our movement, in campaigns against fracking, in XR rebellions and in protests against fossil fuel projects, such as HS2 and airport expansion. The fight for a "just transition" must be a fundamental part of our movement.

We should make sure that the climate movement takes up questions of oppression and injustice. As awareness of the climate crisis has grown, increasing numbers of activists are demanding that the environmental movement acknowledges the historic legacy of colonialism and imperialism in creating the ecological crisis.

This means recognising the way that environmental disasters disproportionately affect the Global South and black people.

It also means understanding that the solutions offered by international bodies are predicated on protecting the interests of the Global North. And they dismiss the voices of marginalised peoples in both the North and South.

The increasing recognition of the importance of voices from the Global South, indigenous movements and black people is important. It is a step forward towards building a united movement that can challenge capitalist destruction of the environment.

The current environmental crisis is closely linked to the development of capitalism—and the history of colonialism and imperialism. Environmental movements in the Global North cannot ignore questions of climate debt, indigenous rights, climate refugees and racism. If we do, we risk looking for solutions that perpetuate or worsen historical injustices and existing oppression.

In fighting for these radical solutions today, we must also recognise that capitalism cannot ever be a sustainable

system. Even if capitalism could abandon fossil fuels, it would still cause environmental destruction due to its unsustainable relationship to the planet.

Marx explained that capitalism destroyed the historic relationship that human society had had with the natural world, breaking up old social relations, privatising the land and turning nature into a commodity.

He said that this process "conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and right-less proletarians"²⁵

And he argued that this led to a rupture in the "metabolic relationship" between human society and the natural world. This relationship, under capitalism, was no longer sustainable. Capital just saw nature as part of the production process.

Writing in 1857-8, he said, "For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognised as a power for itself. And the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production."²⁶

But Marx didn't just stop at a criticism of the way capitalism degraded nature and exploited people in the interest of profits. He argued that it would be possible to create a sustainable world,



24) See www.campaigncc.org/climatejobs

25) Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 895.

26) Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1977), 410

which could heal the “metabolic rift” and create an entirely different relationship between humans and nature.

Such a socialist world would be based on radically different economic priorities. Production would be for need, not for profit. In a socialist society, production would take place democratically, with workers discussing what needs to be made.

Such democratic economic planning would be very different from the top-down state planned economies of Russia and the Eastern Bloc, which claimed to be communist. It would, instead, be based on mass participation.

And socialism would see an end to the competition, waste and overproduction that infects every layer of production under capitalism.

Marx argued that the power to overthrow capitalism lay among the workers whose labour is essential for capitalism to function. Without the exploitation of workers by the bosses, capitalism cannot function. So workers’ ability to withdraw their labour means they can bring the system to a halt.

Workers have the power to stop capitalism. But they can also have the power to build a new society.

Every mass revolutionary movement shows workers create new democratic institutions, which can become alternative organs for political rule.

These workers’ councils—or “soviets as they were known in the 1917 Russian Revolution—are simultaneously bodies for workers’ democracy and places that can organise society.



At one of the key demonstrations outside the Copenhagen COP, radical activists first raised a slogan that has become increasingly common on climate protests—“System Change not Climate Change”. Today, as capitalism continues to give us economic and environmental crisis, we need to scrap it, and build a revolutionary alternative.

In November, we will demonstrate to demand real action from those meeting in Glasgow. We want climate justice, and climate jobs. We want the Global South to receive the funding that can help their economies develop sustainably and protect people from disaster.

We will oppose undemocratic attempts to make corporate bodies even more central to climate solutions. We will demand alternatives to emissions trading schemes and other false solutions, that make a few companies even richer, but do nothing for the billions.

But we are building a movement to fight for a socialist world—before capitalism destroys us. Join us.

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Socialist Worker Our weekly newspaper socialistworker.co.uk

International Socialism Our quarterly journal isj.org.uk



About this pamphlet

World leaders will descend on Glasgow for the COP26 climate summit in November. Delayed a year by the Covid crisis, it is being talked up by politicians and the media as a “last chance” to solve the climate crisis.

It comes in a year that’s hammered home the terrifying reality of the climate crisis with floods, wildfires, hurricanes and droughts.

But, as the COP26 name suggests, it is actually the 26th summit in a quarter of a century of failure.

In this pamphlet, socialist and climate activist Martin Empson argues it’s because the solutions of the COP process are limited by capitalist priorities.

To deliver climate action and justice, we need to break with the profit system and fight for a socialist world that puts people and planet first.

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