

COP – the only show in town or a dangerous diversion?

The Conference of Parties (COP) is the main framework agreed globally for discussing and tackling the environmental crisis, primarily greenhouse gases as the primary driver for global warming.

There is a debate in the environmental movement about whether COP is useful. Its defenders observe that it is the leading annual conference to discuss global warming, gathering politicians, business leaders, trade unions, NGOs, indigenous groups and others to hammer out agreements. It is the 'only show in town' for getting people into the room who can make meaningful decisions. COP has set the benchmark for several climate targets, from the Kyoto Protocols onwards in the 1990s, and by those metrics we can judge success in the fight to stop runaway global warming.

Critics argue that the process is greenwashing on a massive scale, that business interests trump climate justice and the agreements and treaties at COP are not worth the paper they are written on. COP27 was held in Egypt, sponsored by Coca Cola. COP28 is being held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where its president Dr. Sultan Al Jaber is also the CEO of an oil company. It was revealed by the BBC that UAE intended to use the COP to secure lucrative oil contracts. As the climate crisis deepens there is an increasing push to host the meeting in countries with repressive human rights records to deter protests. At the conference itself the Oil-Executive-COP28-President got into an argument with an ex UN special envoy on Climate Change where he argued that "There is no science out there, or no scenario out there, that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what's going to achieve 1.5C" before going onto say that ridding the planet of fossil fuels would "take us back into caves."

When statements like these are made at COP, it is no wonder more and more forces within the global environmental movement are calling for a boycott. And it is no wonder leading voices like Greta Thunberg are taking this stance, accusing COP of "greenwashing, lying and cheating".

The main gain made in the last couple of years is the agreement for a Loss and Damage Fund for countries suffering problems from extreme weather and climate change. Even this was a huge battle as richer nations tried to limit the money available and restrict it to only *island nations* facing submergence. That angered non-island countries like Pakistan, a third of which was recently underwater. This battle was won but the Loss and Damage Fund still ended with that "friend" of the global south – The World Bank.

The fight for renewables

As an example of the limits of COP, take the 2015 Paris Agreement – a legally binding document agreed by 196 parties. Its goal is to make zero carbon solutions credible as alternatives to fossil fuels investments by 2030. You can already see the issue: it remains reliant on the existing market. Everywhere renewable energies require enormous state subsidies, not capitalist competition. (Meanwhile, oil and gas giants also get huge subsidies because they are deemed so strategically important.)

In many countries there simply isn't the return on investment needed for private sector companies to be confident about future profits for renewable technologies. This is why Shell recently abandoned its renewable energy division, not simply because they are moustache twirling bad guys who don't care about the environment but because they have a fiduciary duty to shareholders to ensure maximum profitable returns. Solar and wind power just cannot comply to the legally mandated ends of a large energy company.

Likewise the barriers to entry into the renewable energy sector is much lower for companies than with oil and gas exploration, extraction and transportation. While that might sound good, what it means is that more companies can freely enter the market, further driving down profitability.

This leaves governments burdened with investing more in renewables. Any moves in this

direction should be welcomed but globally we have a surge in the electoral success of the far right who actively deny climate change (Trump, Bolsonaro, Milei etc). Some governments have invested and grown their infrastructure for renewables but this is still just part of the long term (2050!) target of making renewables more profitable and slowly purging fossil fuels from the energy and transport sectors. In the next 25 years, which is too late even if it happens at a scalable level.

Such problems are emblematic of the limitations of the Paris Agreement and indeed the entire COP process. Despotism inroads into private property are needed, leading to the complete socialisation of energy and transport sectors, a rapid and planned shift from fossil fuels regardless of cost. (What price tag can you put on the sustainability of the planet?) That in turn requires a fundamental shift in the socio-economic relations of the planet across borders. Some might balk and conclude that such a plan is too advanced or radical, but it is only as radical as the reality requires.

Ecosocialists support and fight for reforms that can be enacted under capitalism and within states to help with the environmental crisis, or indeed any reforms that improve our lives under this current system of exploitation and alienation. However, the current 'reforms' proposed are mainly a way of developing a greener capitalism. As an end goal this is an illusion and at this stage of the crisis a dangerous diversion.

Capitalism cannot solve the crisis

Why is COP failing? From an ecosocialist perspective we must understand the structural problems for those within the existing system trying to fix the climate crisis. It is not just about cynical and lying politicians and business leaders, though there are plenty of those. It is that the climate crisis (not just global warming but in all the ways the environment is degraded) is itself rooted in the political and socio-economic basis by which we currently organise human society.

COP represents the established interests of the world. The politicians from their nation states represent their national interests. Business leaders represent the interests of their shareholders. Yes, NGOs and climate activists can attend, lobby and expose failures, but the power relations that maintain capitalism and its destructive exploitation of people and planet remain intact.

This is a key difference between mainstream views on tackling climate change and ecosocialist perspectives. Hosting COP in the UAE, presided by an oil magnate, is seen as a good thing by some liberal voices because it shows that these countries and business leaders are taking

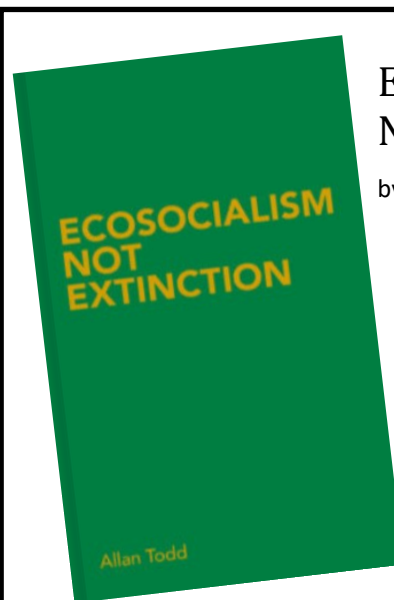
the environment seriously. The news coming from COP should disprove this belief completely.

COP28 is an example of what is called institutional or regulatory capture. It was set up to make a difference by well meaning people, but it was inevitably co-opted and dominated by the very forces it was meant to challenge and change. An approach to climate change which tries to take business leaders and captains of industry 'with us' will not only fail but is a dangerous mistake – these people are part of the problem, not the solution. Instead of offering solutions, it excuses a status quo in which a few temporarily benefit from the destruction of our world. Climate change is a fight to the death against the rule of capital, not an exercise in consensus building with people ravaging the planet for profit.

We need socialisation of the economy under democratic control and a move from a profit driven money economy to a society based on human needs, which includes the needs of the environment in which humanity is inextricably bound up. We do not need to rest our hopes on whether a government can scrape together enough cash for more wind farms while pouring greater quantities or capital into the military industrial complex.

We can no longer base fundamental decisions on calculating and weighing whether this or that investment in a viable relationship with our ecosphere accords with the needs of global businesses. That thinking has led us to total disaster and is only deepening the problem.

It is likely COP28 will produce some statement or 'agreement'. Some money might even be allocated to socially useful ends, albeit probably with deadly caveats. Meanwhile, the machinery of global capitalism grinds on, sucking oil and gas out of the ground, deforesting the planet, polluting our oceans and poisoning us.



Ecosocialism Not Extinction

by Allan Todd - £5

This book is an introduction to Ecosocialism and how to fight for it. Available from Resistance Books

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