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The Glasgow summit, climate change, and the case for socialism

Heads of state, government ministers and thousands of other delegates from all corners of the globe are converging on Glasgow, Scotland for two weeks of climate change talks beginning this weekend.



Firefighters work at the scene of forest fire near Kyuyorelyakh village at Gorny Ulus area, west of Yakutsk, in Russia Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. (AP Photo/Ivan Nikiforov)

This year marks the 26th round of negotiations following the ratification by more than 190 countries of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was agreed to in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. In the subsequent 29 years of international talks, capitalist governments have produced one failure after another, leaving the world on

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a trajectory towards catastrophe. This year's session in Glasgow promises more of the same.

Much, however, has changed since the last negotiating session in 2019. The past two years have seen a series of escalating climate disasters in all regions of the globe, including massive wildfires from the Australian bush to the American west, devastating flooding in Europe, Asia and the Americas, and deadly heatwaves the world over.

Scientific advances have further strengthened our knowledge of climate change and its impact on humanity. The International Panel on Climate Change's latest comprehensive report released in August confirmed that effects are "widespread, rapid and intensifying, and some trends are now irreversible." The world has already warmed by 1.2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels. The climate system's inertia has effectively locked in a global temperature increase of 1.5 C within the next two decades, if not sooner.

Neither the dire warnings of scientists nor the consequences of extreme weather have fundamentally altered the pathetic global response to climate change. The international paralysis in the face of the climate crisis is compounded by the absence of any global response to the pandemic. The Glasgow summit itself was postponed for a year in the hopes that the delay would allow for a collective response to end the mass death. Those hopes have given way to an even more disastrous year, with the global death toll more than doubling in 2021.

The main item on the Glasgow agenda is to revise the greenhouse gas emissions targets each nation committed to after the Paris agreement six years ago. These commitments are entirely voluntary and have no enforcement mechanism. Despite its toothlessness, the collective aspirations from Paris bring the world nowhere near the stated goal of limiting temperature increase to 2.0 C, let alone the target urged by scientists of 1.5 C.

An analysis by the United Nations Environment Programme released this week found that if countries manage to fulfill their current commitments, temperatures are still likely to rise 2.7 C this century. The reality is even worse, however. Most nations have done far too little to transition to renewable energy, increase efficiency, and implement other measures required to achieve their insufficient goals. If the current policies continue apace, the

world will likely eclipse 3 C of warming by 2100, a magnitude of change that calls into question the future of civilization.

The solution offered at Glasgow is for governments to conjure up new, more aggressive targets in line with less catastrophic warming trajectories. These targets remain entirely voluntary, however, and are open to cynical accounting tricks. Brazil, for instance, revised its estimate of 2005 emissions upwards so that on a percentage basis, it remains on track to achieve its commitment.

The stark contrast between the promises to rapidly reduce carbon pollution and the reality of policies that retain the fossil fuel-powered status quo is exemplified by the United States, responsible for more carbon dioxide currently in the atmosphere than any other nation. President Biden arrived in Glasgow Friday with promises to reduce greenhouse gas releases to half of 2005 levels by the end of the decade and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Meanwhile, he is in the midst of negotiations with his own party to gut his infrastructure and social spending proposals. The remaining funding to address climate change amounts to just \$550 billion over 10 years, a fraction of what the country spends preparing for war in a single year. The bulk of this climate funding is devoted to tax giveaways to businesses.

Behind the false promises and posturing over national commitments are explosive national rivalries that permeate the Glasgow summit. For US imperialism, the shift in policy from the Trump administration, which withdrew from the Paris agreement, to the Biden administration, which rejoined it, does not reflect a turn towards international coordination to resolve a catastrophic issue facing humanity. Instead, it reopens a diplomatic front in the fight for economic and geopolitical dominance, aimed above all at countering the rise of China.

Biden made this clear in a speech Thursday, which he began by stating his aim to “turn the climate crisis into an opportunity to put us on a path not only to compete but to win the economic competition of the 21st century against China and every other country in the world.”

His comments followed the recent release of a suite of White House-ordered reports on the national security implications of climate change. The first ever National Intelligence

Estimate of climate change summed up what is at stake in Glasgow. “Geopolitical tensions are likely to grow as countries increasingly argue about how to accelerate the reductions in net greenhouse gas emissions that will be needed to meet the Paris Agreement goals,” the report noted. “Debate will center on who bears more responsibility to act and to pay—and how quickly—and countries will compete to control resources and dominate new technologies needed for the clean energy transition.”

Similar calculations are pursued by all the imperialist governments, which are driven above all by an attempt to gain economic advantage for their native industries and to strengthen their geopolitical standing.

Meanwhile, the chasm between the actions of governments scheming in Glasgow and what is needed to save humanity continues to grow.

This spring, the International Energy Agency, an intergovernmental advisory agency, released a roadmap to achieving a net-zero global energy sector by 2050. The energy sector accounts for three-quarters of global carbon emissions. Such a trajectory is needed to limit warming to 1.5 C.

The report lays out the fact that “large number of unparalleled changes across all parts of the energy sector would need to be realised simultaneously, at a time when the world is trying to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.” Just in the next nine years, the following are needed:

- immediately ceasing approvals of all new oil and gas fields and coal mines;
- more than doubling the share of renewables in electricity to 60 percent;
- tripling the annual investment in the power sector;
- retrofitting half of the existing buildings in advanced economies and one-third in developing countries;
- doubling global battery manufacturing every two years;
- increasing solar installations five-fold; and
- transitioning to 50 percent of new passenger cars powered by electricity, up from 2.5 percent in 2019.

Does anyone think that capitalist governments the world over are capable of this? The parties at the Glasgow summit can't even agree to abide by their grossly inadequate promises, let alone implement a systemic transformation.

The pandemic has demonstrated the real priorities of the ruling class, even when faced with mass death. The abysmal measures to address public health were accompanied by a massive intervention of central banks in the crisis that erupted in the financial system in March of 2020, unleashing virtually unlimited funds to shore up the banks and finance houses. With the markets temporarily stabilized, the priority shifted to reopening the economy in most areas of the globe. The virus was allowed to spread and mutate. Millions are dead as a result, with no end in sight. At the same time, social inequality has reached obscene new heights.

The fundamental challenges posed by the pandemic are the same as those posed by climate change. Just as the coronavirus knows no borders, neither does carbon dioxide. An effective response to the basic problems of our time must similarly break through the national boundaries set up under capitalism.

They require a massive reallocation of resources, directing social resources to meet social needs, not private profit.

The enormous investments needed for a rapid transition to a renewable-powered economy are impossible so long as the key levers of the economy are controlled privately and operated in the interest of profit.

The failure to address climate change is not caused by humans in the abstract. It is caused by a particular social system, capitalism. The inherent contradictions in capitalism—(1) the division of an economically integrated world into rival countries and (2) socialized production alongside private ownership of the means of production—present an obstacle that we must overthrow if we are to stave off the catastrophic implications of climate change. It requires a rational economic plan coordinated on a global level. It requires the struggle for socialism.

At its root, climate change is fundamentally a class question. In whose interests does society operate? Capitalism, operating on behalf of a tiny but fabulously wealthy ruling

elite, has proven itself utterly bankrupt. The urgent task is to turn to the working class, the social force whose fundamental interests align with reconstructing society so as to fulfill social needs, not generate private profit.

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