

Paris agreement papers over failure to act on climate change

By Patrick Martin
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The global climate conference held in Paris ended Saturday with the approval of an agreement that commits none of the 196 signatory nations to a single action. The 31-page document sets nonbinding targets for the emission of greenhouse gases, based on voluntary submissions by each country, which in many cases do not even represent a reduction in projected future emissions.

The leaders of 20 small island nations in the Pacific, which face inundation by rising sea levels or destruction by intensifying storms, were fobbed off with additional cash. Their demand that the climate deal set as its goal to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees C, rather than the 2 degrees C suggested at previous meetings, was ignored in the final stages of the talks.

Saturday's deal was greeted with an explosion of hosannas by leaders of the major imperialist powers that are historically responsible for the bulk of the world's pollution, as well as by the corporate-controlled media around the world.

President Obama made a televised statement in the Cabinet Room of the White House, declaring the accord a "turning point" in efforts to prevent drastic climate change. "We met the moment," he claimed. "Together, we've shown what's possible when the world stands as one."

"This is a tremendous victory for all of our citizens—not for any one country or bloc, but a victory for all of the planet, and for future generations," said Secretary of State John Kerry. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, who chaired the talks, said that if the conference had failed to reach an agreement, "The citizens of the world—our own citizens—and our children would not understand it. Nor, I believe, would they forgive us."

French President Francois Hollande took the prize for most grotesque overstatement, declaring, "The 12th of December 2015 will remain a great date for the planet. In Paris, there have been many revolutions over the centuries. Today it is the most beautiful and the most peaceful revolution that has been just accomplished—a revolution for climate change."

For all his talk of "peaceful revolution," Hollande oversaw a brutal crackdown by French police and military on environmental demonstrators in the streets of Paris, using the new draconian powers assumed by the French state in the wake of last month's terrorist attacks to beat, arrest and jail protesters. On the sidelines of this "peaceful" conference, moreover, the imperialist powers involved—including the US, Germany, Britain and France—have been plotting escalation of war in the Middle East.

The two-week climate summit could perhaps be summed up with a variation on the saying, "The operation was a success but the patient died." In this case, the political operation in Paris was a great success for those who organized it, principally Hollande, Obama and other leaders of the major world powers who sought to posture as environmentalists concerned about the future of "the only planet we have." The prognosis for the planet, however, remains terminal, so long as it remains imprisoned by the global capitalist system.

The leaders of the major powers got what they wanted in Paris—the pretense of action on climate change, with as little cost as possible, and with zero positive effect on the deteriorating global environment. The final document deserves more detailed analysis, but in broad strokes, it does little or nothing to combat global warming and climate change. There are no mandatory measures; nothing is required of any

government or corporation.

The main “success” of the Paris conference is that it did not end in a public debacle like its predecessor, the Copenhagen climate conference of 2009, where divisions between the imperialist powers and so-called emerging nations like China, India and Brazil led to a complete breakdown. The “lesson” of Copenhagen, as far as Washington and other imperialist capitals were concerned, was to manage expectations in advance so that the adoption of any agreement—no matter how weak its provisions—could be presented as a huge stride forward.

The Obama administration dictated the structure of the agreement, based on voluntary goals for cutting emissions and self-reporting by each country, with the only “enforcement” mechanism being the pressure of global public opinion.

According to media accounts, the summit nearly collapsed at the last minute, when the US delegation discovered a “shall” instead of a “should” in Article 4, calling on the wealthier countries to set targets for cutting greenhouse gas pollution. “When I looked at that, I said, ‘We cannot do this and we will not do this,’” Secretary of State Kerry told reporters later. French Foreign Minister Fabius incorporated the change into a mass of “technical revisions” pushed through at the last minute.

The *Guardian* noted another backroom action that sheds light on the cynical horse-trading among the governments represented at the summit: “When US officials realised Paul Oquist, Nicaragua’s delegate, planned to deliver a fiery speech denouncing the deal, Secretary of State John Kerry and Raúl Castro, the Cuban leader, telephoned Managua to make sure Oquist spoke after the agreement was adopted, when it would in effect be too late.” The chief diplomat for US imperialism and the Cuban head of state joined forces to block a small country from making its objections known.

The chief US delegate to the summit, Todd Stern, the US special envoy for climate change, summed up the cynicism of the deal by explaining that the agreement had to be voluntary because that would encourage countries to set more ambitious targets for emissions reduction, knowing there would be no penalty for failure. “We are quite convinced that there are many countries who would be inclined to put in a lower

target than they’re really capable of if they were worried about the legally binding nature of the targets themselves,” he told reporters.

There were even suggestions that the voluntary and nonbinding character of the Paris agreement was a positive feature, because it would encourage reliance on private capital and private conservation efforts. The Obama administration hailed the pledges of billionaires like Microsoft’s Bill Gates to fund the development of new technology for extracting carbon from the atmosphere. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon suggested that the deal meant, “Markets now have the clear signal to unleash the full force of human ingenuity.”

In fact it is “markets”—that is, the capitalist profit system—which is the main obstacle to human progress. As long as humanity is straitjacketed by the private ownership of the world’s wealth by a tiny handful of capitalist billionaires, and by the nation-state system that is inseparable from it, it is impossible to mount the necessary mobilization of the technological and economic resources required to resolve the growing global environmental crisis.

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