

# COP28: Trashing the UN is easy, but where is the alternative?

*Alan Thornett writes on Ecosocialist Discussion blog about COP28 and debates the key issues raised.*

Despite being held in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – the sixth biggest oil producer in the world, and presided over by a top oil executive with the biggest fossil fuel lobby ever seen at a COP conference, COP28 was a surprisingly productive event.

It met at a time of dramatic acceleration in global warming, of course. 2023 was not only the hottest year since records began, but it did so by an unprecedented margin. The global average figure for 2023 was 14.98°C, a massive 0.17°C above the previous record. For the first time, every day in that year was 1°C above the pre-industrial level. Almost half were over 1.5°C above the pre-industrial level, and two were more than 2°C above it.

It was against this background that COP28 agreed—after a heated debate and an overrun of the conference—that the conference agreed unanimously to call for “a transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science”.

UN Secretary General António Guterres told the [Guardian](#) on December 13 that. “Whether you like it or not fossil fuel phase-out is (now) inevitable”. “Let’s hope it hasn’t come too late.” I agree with him on both points. Fossil fuel is now an obsolescent energy source in which investment will become increasingly problematic and which must be replaced by

renewables with the utmost urgency.

He is absolutely right. It is an important strategic breakthrough that could eventually spell the end—or at least the beginning of the end—of fossil fuels and the fossil industry. He is also right to question whether it has come too late to save the planet from catastrophe, which only time will tell, unfortunately. We are, however, better placed to defend the planet with this agreement in place than without it.

It is of comparable importance, in my view, to the two key decisions agreed in Paris in 2015. The first was that global warming is anthropogenic, i.e., a product of human activity. The second was the recognition that achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 could only be achieved by holding the global average temperature increase over preindustrial levels to below 1.5°C.

A last-minute decision to remove all references to oil and gas sabotaged a similar proposal to phase out fossil fuels at COP26 in Glasgow in 2022. Remarkably, fossil fuels had never been mentioned as such before at a COP conference, presumably to avoid frightening the horses.

Johan Rockström, a hugely respected Earth systems scientist, a member of the Stockholm Resilience Centre, and the leader of the team that developed the concept of planetary boundaries, welcomed the decision.

He told the Guardian that the agreement is a “pivotal landmark” in the climate struggle. It does, he says, deliver on making it clear to all financial institutions, businesses, and societies that we are now finally—eight years behind the Paris schedule—at the true ‘beginning of the end’ of the fossil fuel-driven world economy.”

[Greenpeace](#) said that while there are still some important loopholes to address, this package is “a powerful milestone.” While much more campaigning will be needed over the next year

to make this happen as soon as possible, “its game on from here!”

## Other key decisions

The first item on the agenda in Dubai was the “loss and damage fund,” which was agreed upon in principle at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh. It was declared operational on the first day of COP28, with an initial \$700 million to fill the fund. This is a drop in the ocean, however, compared to the \$580 billion in damage that vulnerable countries will face by [2030](#).

A stocktake of the “Nationally Determined Contributions” was also conducted as a part of the “ratcheting up process” adopted in Paris in 2015, after which it was reported that there had been a collective effort to meet the \$100 billion target set in Paris and that new pledges would be sought to make up the shortfall. There were also policy discussions on a wide range of important issues, including the following:

- *Renewable energy.* The conference agreed to triple [renewable energy](#) globally, double its energy efficiency by 2030, and accelerate emissions reductions from road transport. It was also agreed to [cut methane](#) by at least 30 percent by 2030.
- *The internal combustion engine.* It was agreed that the [internal combustion engine](#) would be phased out by 2030. Electric vehicles powered by renewable energy, it said, are the future, and we can’t achieve global decarbonisation of transport without them.
- *Low-carbon cities.* There was a report from the Local [Climate Action Summit](#) regarding energy consumption in cities. It was noted that cities are responsible for more than [three-quarters](#) of global energy consumption and more than [half](#) of global greenhouse gas emissions. Navigating this within a low-carbon and resilient framework can foster a more equitable and just future. Cities need to start building much more eco-friendly

infrastructure at a much faster pace.

- *Public transport.* It was agreed that global public transport capacity should be [doubled](#) by 2030.
- *Food and agriculture.* The [World Resources Institute](#) reported that there were six major food and agriculture breakthroughs made in Dubai. Food and land, they say, drive one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, food systems around the world are vulnerable to droughts, flooding, extreme heat, and other impacts of climate change. The issue is particularly critical in many developing countries—for example, in Brazil, where food and land use drive [70% of emissions](#) while over half the population remains food insecure.
- *Deforestation.* The Brazilian delegation successfully proposed [a new global fund](#) to pay countries to keep their tropical forests intact. The proposal called for the creation of a massive global scheme to help preserve rainforests in scores of countries, called the “Tropical Forests Forever” fund. The concept would pay residents and landowners who help preserve forested areas like the Amazon. Finance would initially be raised from sovereign wealth funds as well as from other investors, such as the oil industry.
- *The biodiversity crisis.* There was strong support for the landmark agreement for nature recovery that was signed last year at the UN COP51 conference on biodiversity, which included protecting 30% of nature by 2030.

## **Carbon taxes**

There was a remarkable intervention by IMF chief [Kristalina Georgieva](#) (no less) on carbon pricing and carbon taxes. In what was the first time the subject had been discussed at a COP conference, she made a two-part proposal on behalf of the IMF:

- First, the abolition of all subsidies for fossil fuel production
- Second, put an explicit charge (or tax) on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions at the point of production. This, she said, would raise the trillions of dollars that are needed to tackle the climate crisis.

She claimed that because right-wing climate denial politicians and parties all over the world have targeted them, governments have delayed implementing such taxes. However, she said, "When you put a price on carbon, decarbonisation accelerates." The IMF, World Bank, OECD, and World Trade Organisation, she said, have set up a taskforce to examine carbon pricing policies and their application around the world.

As someone who has been arguing for exactly this many years, I found this intervention staggering. It appears that a large section of the ruling elites have adopted one of the key elements of an exit policy from fossil energy. The IMF is not only a capitalist institution but one that was founded precisely in order to oversee the international market on behalf of global capitalism.

COP conferences have traditionally resisted discussing this kind of specific emissions reduction demand in favour of general principles. It is important that they are now discussing both.

### **The harsh reality**

This positive outcome in Dubai reinforces what has long been clear: i.e., that at this stage of the climate crisis, with global temperatures rising at an ever faster rate and time running out, the only way to avoid catastrophic damage to the planet is by making the COP process work.

Any other proposition is leftist posturing. The science is irrefutable. The global temperature is rising at an ever-increasing rate. Dangerous tipping points are starting to

trigger. Time is running out. The 1.5°C limit hangs by a thread, climate chaos could be irreversible within a decade, and in the end, nothing can be built on a dead planet.

At this stage, moreover, only governmental action—and action taken by governments prepared to go on a war footing—can make the changes necessary to stop climate change in the limited time we have left, and only the UN COP process has a chance of achieving it.

Not that it will be easy, of course. The implementation of COP policies has been a battle from the outset. Member states are quick to exploit any loopholes on offer, including, for example, carbon capture and storage and the notion of transitional fuels, both of which provide the opportunity to hang on to fossil fuels for a bit longer.

Others simply ignore their previous commitments—flagrantly, if necessary—if they cut across their domestic political interests. A prime current example is the UK Tory government, which has dumped a raft of previous ecological commitments in order to exploit a backlash from car drivers against measures to improve air quality in London, which it thinks it can use against Labour in the general election later this year.

These include delaying the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030 to 2035; delaying the ban on the sale of fossil-fuel heating boilers from 2035 to 2040; deprioritizing the transition to electric vehicles; issuing over a hundred new licences for oil and gas exploration; and a completely new oil field in the North Sea.

Such governments, however, have to be faced down if there is to be a solution, and that can best be done within the COP process.

## **The role of the left**

Most of the left denounce the UN COP process at every

opportunity, in the most vitriolic terms they can find, with no regard to factual or historical accuracy, while having no viable alternative to offer itself. This is a big problem, in my view.

George Monbiot, for example, whom I greatly respect and who should know better in my view, declared in the [Guardian](#) of December 9 that the whole COP process had broken down, had “achieved absolutely nothing since it started in 1992, and are now they are talking us into oblivion.” “Let’s face it,” he goes on: “climate summits are broken. The delegates talk and talk, while Earth systems slide towards deadly tipping points”. In other words, it is a roadblock to doing anything positive about climate change, and the sooner it gets out of the way, the better.

The Swedish writer and climate campaigner Andreas Malm, author of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, told the [Guardian](#) on April 21, 2023, that “climate diplomacy is hopeless” and that he does not have “a shred of hope that the elites are prepared to take the urgent action needed to avert catastrophic climate change.”.

The COP conferences, he tells us, “have degenerated into kind of an annual theatre for pretending that we’re doing something about global warming while, in fact, we’re just letting fuel be poured on the fire. “If we let the dominant classes take care of this problem,” he said, “they’re going to drive at top speed into absolute inferno. Nothing suggests that they have any capacity to do anything else of their own accord because they are totally enmeshed with the process of capital accumulation.”.

They reflect Greta Thunberg’s Glasgow “blah, blah, blah, blah” speech when, in fact, crucial debates were taking place into which she should have been intervening.

George Monbiot says that he had considered proposing changes

to the decision-making procedure at COP summits but had decided against it. Andreas Malm proposes that the climate movement should have some kind of military wing, which would get us nowhere when it comes to building the kind of broad global mass movement that is going to be necessary.

## **The revolutionary left**

The revolutionary overthrow of global capitalism, which they imply is imminent, is the solution that the revolutionary left advocates, whether explicitly or implicitly. The fact that the far-right is growing dangerously across Europe, and Trump stands a very good chance of winning the US Presidency in November (for example), does nothing to deter them in this.

This kind of maximalism, however, has many consequences beyond wishful thinking. It implies that anything short of a global revolution is a reformist diversion and that victories are not victories but defeats if a reformist institution like the UN COP process is involved.

It implies that the collapse of the COP process, which is entirely possible as the crisis sharpens, would be good for the future of the planet, when in reality it would let global warming rip and leave us facing a catastrophe situation without a global project by which to confront it and with the right-wing waiting in the wings.

It also leads many on the radical left to oppose the placing of environmental demands on the COP process because, they say, it is a capitalist institution. This is not only wrong and ultra-left, but strange, since the left demands such institutions in other arenas of struggle all the time. We put demands on the employers, who are capitalists, and on governments that are also capitalist institutions. The fire service is a capitalist institution designed first and foremost to protect private property, but we would not refuse its help if our house was burning down.



## **A transitional approach**

The task we face today is not whether global capitalism can be overthrown by revolutionary means in the next few years, but whether it can be forced to take the measures necessary to save the planet from global warming today as a part of a longer-term struggle to eventually replace capitalism with an ecosocialist society. If we are unable to build a movement capable of forcing change under capitalism, how are we going to build a movement capable of its revolutionary overthrow?

It is not true—as many on the left insist—that capitalism cannot be forced to make structural changes that are contrary to the logic of its existence. In fact, it made concessions when it agreed under pressure to support a maximum global temperature increase of 1.5°C in Paris and when it agreed under similar pressure to transition away from fossil fuels in Dubai.

We need a transitional approach, built around a set of transitional demands, that, as well as addressing the immediate needs of the struggle today, also has a strategic logic towards a post-capitalist solution. Reforms are not necessarily reformist. The road to revolutionary change is forged in the struggle for reform. In fact, the struggle for reform is often the only real road to revolutionary change. Depending on the dynamics of struggle they generate, in fact, both the 1.5°C limit and the temperature increase and reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 are transitional demands.

The ruling elites, in any case, are deeply divided on the future of the planet. While its more enlightened wing recognises the approaching climate catastrophe and supports the COP process as the only way to save the planet—and within the capitalist order, of course—its dystopian, anti-woke, climate-denying wing, such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and Orbán, are prepared to gamble on the future of the planet against their climate denial, fight it out on the streets, and impose an

authoritarian regime if they get the chance.

These people are deeply hostile to the progressive agenda required to save the planet, i.e., humanitarianism, collectivism, environmentalism, and the defence of nature and the natural environment, that are involved in saving the planet on a sustainable basis.

The role of the left and progressive forces in the climate struggle must be to exploit this division on behalf of the future of the planet.

### **The role of the UN**

I am not a natural defender of the UN—the “thieves kitchen,” as Lenin called its predecessor, the League of Nations—or even of its environmental work.

It is important, however, to recognise the positive role that the UN has played in global warming over the last 35 years, decades before the socialist left showed any interest. In fact, it is difficult to play a useful role in the climate struggle today without an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of that contribution and what it represents as a focus for international campaigning and mobilisation.

The idea that the UN could have resolved the climate crisis many years ago if only it had been prepared to snap its fingers hard enough—which is implicit in the left critique—is nonsense. As is the notion that it has “achieved absolutely nothing since it was launched in 1992” or that its conferences are “a kind of annual theatre for pretending that we’re doing something about global warming.” Such caricatures contribute nothing to the struggle.

The UN’s engagement with the ecological crisis began in 1972 with the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme.

The [International Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC), a scientific body comprising 2,500 scientists from 130 countries, was launched in 1989. It's mandated to "prepare a comprehensive review and recommendations with respect to the state of knowledge of the science of climate change, the social and economic impact of climate change, and potential response strategies and elements for inclusion in a possible future international convention on climate."

It coincided with James Hansen's [historic address](#) to the US Senate on global warming and climate change.

The [Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) was launched in 1993 at the Earth Summit in Rio. Its mandate was to establish an international agreement in order to "stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate systems." What it did in practice was establish the COP process.

The Convention, in particular, was a frontal challenge to the petrochemical industry and what it produced, which had dominated planet Earth for almost a century and had shaped it in its image. Abolishing fossil fuels and replacing them with renewable energy was always going to mean uniting every country in the world in a monumental confrontation.

The fossil fuel industry responded with extreme hostility to all this and went on over the next 30 years to spend billions of dollars on the next opposing COP process, including the mobilisation of an army of climate deniers around the world to discredit the science, and they were initially very successful.

## **Legally binding votes**

The most contentious issue in the COP process faced from the outset was the issue of legally binding (or non-legally binding) votes at conferences. While the Framework Convention did not provide for binding votes, it had the authority to

require them on carbon reduction pledges by way of a protocol to the Convention. Such a protocol, called the Kyoto Protocol, was agreed upon at COP3 in Kyoto in 1997. It was, however, highly contentious and difficult to implement.

This came to a head at COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, when 25 countries, including some of the world's biggest polluters—the USA, China, Canada, and Australia—refused to accept a legally binding vote over a proposal to restrict the global temperature increase to no more than 2°C above the preindustrial level. They all walked out, and the conference broke up in disarray.

The split effectively paralysed the COP process until COP21 in Paris in 2015, where legally binding votes on carbon reduction pledges were replaced by a consensus system, i.e., by unanimous, non-binding votes. Member states failing to meet their pledges would have to face the political and reputational consequences involved at the next COP, and under conditions where the crisis itself would inevitably be even worse.

This was correct, in my view. This has certainly been more effective, both in holding the whole thing together and in implementing decisions. Although getting 198 diverse and complete countries to act together to save the planet is always a formidable task, it is better than endless splits with no dialogue and no progress.

Meanwhile, the COP process, we should recognise, has been instrumental in defeating the climate deniers and winning the overwhelming majority of the scientific community over on the science of climate change—without which we get nowhere. Additionally, the COP process, without which the fight against climate change would be ineffective, has significantly contributed to a seismic shift in the public's awareness of the climate crisis in recent years.

## **An exit strategy from fossil fuels**

Any campaign against climate change, if it is to be successful, must have a viable existing strategy for fossil fuels based on a socially just transition to renewables, whether it is the UN or the left. While the exit strategy being pursued by the COP process until now has been net-zero emissions by 2050, it does not propose by what mechanism this should be achieved.

I have long argued that the most effective way to cut carbon emissions quickly and in a way compatible with social justice is by making fossil fuels far more expensive than renewables by means of carbon taxes, as argued (remarkably) by the IMF in Dubai. When properly managed and carried out as a part of the significant transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor, this can both provide a socially just transition for the most vulnerable members of society and shield it from right-wing forces like the far right in Britain or the yellow vests in France.

The best way of doing this, in my view, is through a fee-and-dividend project along the lines proposed by climate scientist James Hansen in his 2012 book *Storms of My Grandchildren*. He set out the main points as follows:

- Fossil-fuel companies would be charged an easily implemented carbon fee imposed at the well head, mine shaft, or point of entry.
- 100% of the revenue collected would be distributed monthly to the population on a per capita basis as dividends, with up to two-half shares for children per family.
- Dividends would be sent directly via electronic transfers to bank accounts or debit cards.
- The carbon fee would be a single, uniform amount in the

form of dollars per tonne of carbon dioxide emitted from the fuel.

- The carbon fee would then gradually and predictably be ramped up so as to achieve the necessary carbon reductions.
- At the same time, current subsidies to the fossil fuel industry would be eliminated.

When applied to the USA, he argued that 60% of the population would receive net economic benefits, i.e., the dividends they received back would exceed the increased prices paid. As the IMF speaker concluded in Dubai, as mentioned above, “when you put a price on carbon, decarbonisation accelerates.”.

The best exposition of Hansen’s proposal can be found in *The Case for a Carbon Tax* by Shi-Ling-Hsu, published by Island Press in 2011.

Cutting emissions from the demand side in this way is the only socially just way of doing it since it can be carried out within the framework of an overall taxation system that is heavily progressive and brings about a major transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor. Other alternatives, often advanced by the left, such as production cuts by government decision or the rationing of energy, not only do not work but can generate popular backlashes along the lines of the yellow vests, and rationing would create a black market.

It might be expected that the left would support such taxes since it supports taxing the rich, but this is not the case. Most on the radical left oppose carbon taxes, I presume, because they do not involve the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

## **Mass movements**

It is unlikely that the climate struggle will be resolved without big confrontations and mass movements, for which ecosocialists have a responsibility to make preparations.

The best scenario, of course, is that a mass movement is built out of the existing global justice movement and includes everyone who is prepared to fight to save the planet on a progressive basis.

There is another scenario, however, which is that a mass movement or movements arise spontaneously following ecological or societal breakdown as a result of the failure of humanity to stop runaway global warming, resulting in catastrophic impacts on the planet, and with ultra-right and fascist forces waiting in the wings.

While any movement capable of saving the planet will initially be (hopefully) progressive rather than ecosocialist in character, it will be crucial that there are ecosocialists inside it able to fight not just for a sustainable energy transition but one based on social and economic justice and in an anti-capitalist direction.

It is the need to address these eventualities that makes the strategic discussions we have today around the climate and ecological struggle so important. The challenge for ecosocialists in such a situation is not just to be on the right side but to be able to make a contribution to the line of march and the principals involved.

*Alan Thornett January 24th 2024*

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# COP 28- what is at stake?

**Alan Thornett writes:**

COP28 (along with planet Earth) is faced with “an absolutely [gobsmackingly bananas](#) increase in the global temperature”

COP28 – the annual UN global summit on global warming – is taking place from November 30<sup>th</sup> until December 12 – under the auspices of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change that was launched in 1992 to protect the planet against “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”, which now takes place annually. It is the 28<sup>th</sup> UN climate change summit since 1992, and will take place in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

COP28, along with other recent such summits faces a deadly, and indeed existential, contradiction between the relentless acceleration of global warming i.e. of the average global surface temperature of the planet – and the inability of the COP process to bring it under control, or even hold it to a maximum increase of 1.5°C in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement.

It became clear in August that 2023 would be of a different order of magnitude in terms of temperature when July turned out to be the world’s hottest month ever recorded.

The UN Secretary General [António Guterres](#) – the most radical the UN has had on climate change – responded rightly by declaring that this meant that “the era of global warming had ended, and the era of global boiling has arrived”. It meant, he said, that: “Climate change is here, it is terrifying, and it is just the beginning. It is still possible to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C (above pre-industrial levels), and avoid the very worst of climate change, he said, but only with dramatic, immediate climate action.”



The September figure, however, was a whole lot worse. It was a staggering  $0.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  above the previous such record. The Guardian's environmental editor [Damian Carrington](#) quoted climate scientist Zeke Hausfather who had tweeted that: "This month was, in my professional opinion as a climate scientist – absolutely gobsmackingly bananas. It beat the prior monthly temperature record by over  $0.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and was around  $1.8^{\circ}\text{C}$  warmer than preindustrial levels." He noted that datasets from European and Japanese scientists confirmed the leap.

It's worth noting that the difference in the average global temperature between now and the depths of the last ice age when these islands were under a kilometre of ice is around  $5.0^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

In mid-November [Guterres](#) went further warning that. "Present trends are racing our planet down a dead-end  $3^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperature rise. This is a failure of leadership, a betrayal of the vulnerable, and a massive missed opportunity. Renewables have never been cheaper or more accessible. We know it is still possible to make the 1.5 degree limit a reality. It requires tearing out the poisoned root of the climate crisis: fossil fuels."

He added: "Leaders must drastically up their game, now, with record ambition, record action, and record emissions reductions. No more greenwashing. No more foot-dragging."

## **The UK's sellout**

One member state that has not upped their game – scandalously – is the UK under Sunak's Tory government – which has gone in exactly the opposite direction. In order to exploit a reactionary backlash from car drivers against Labour in a recent byelection Sunak has delayed the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030 to 2035 will deprioritise the transition to electric vehicles. He has also announced that a ban on the sale of fossil-fuel boilers from 2035 would be

watered down and extra exemptions introduced.

Most significantly he has issued a new generation of oil and gas licences for the North Sea and given the go-ahead for a new oil and gas field. It is a monumental stab in the back for the whole COP decarbonisation process.

Sunak insists (ludicrously) that none of this will affect the ability of Britain can still reach his 2050 net zero target. The UN has strongly protested.

### **The venue**

The venue of this COP is a major problem of course. Few countries could be less suitable for such a summit than the UEA. It is not only the 7<sup>th</sup> biggest oil producer in the world at 3,250,000 barrels a day. It also holds the 7<sup>th</sup> largest proven reserves of natural gas in the world at over 215 trillion cubic feet. It is also yet another host nation, following Sharm El-Sheikh, with an appalling history of human rights abuses and an economy based on fossil fuel exports, and the president of the COP will be Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber who is the Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology of the UAE, and managing director and group CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company.

As a result of this, many campaigners will not travel to Dubai in person but will mount their protests at home or via the global day of action which has already been called for the last day of the summit which is December 12<sup>th</sup>. The problem has been compounded, however, by the astonishing revelation that the UEA has been using COP meetings to sell off oil and gas on the side. Guterres has denounced it as a serious breach of the standards of conduct expected of a COP president.

It would be a mistake, however, to allow the venue problem to dominate our response. It is difficult for the UN to exclude a member state from the presidency when they are seeking to take

their 193 member states together towards net zero and when hosting a COP often has a positive effect of the host nation in terms of its own record.

The primary role of a COP summit in any case is in pushing the member states to meet their commitment takes place between COP meetings rather than at them when the die has often been cast, also to plan actions and interventions for the following year. In the end the COP process has to be bigger than this since it is dealing with a global existential emergence with a short time line for its conclusion.

The COP conferences, however, urgently need democratising in order to give the climate movement a lot more space and to severely restrict corporate lobbying the access to it given to the petrochemical industry.

The aim of the climate movement should be to maximise mobilisations around every COP summit and where it is not possible at the venue it should be done at the international level. This is important both in order to mobilise the movement and also because it is the best opportunity we have to put demands on the global elites at an international level.

Meanwhile Al Jaber, COP president on behalf of the UAE, has told the Guardian in an exclusive interview on the eve of the conference that he thought that the world could agree a “robust roadmap” of cuts in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 that would meet scientific advice.

We shall see.

## **Key challenges in Dubai**

The principal responsibility of each COP is to conduct a global stocktake of the carbon reduction targets—or “Nationally Determined Contributions”—to which each member state is pledged as a part of the so-called “ratcheting up process” adopted at COP21 in Paris in 2015. This requires each

member state to set its own carbon reduction targets and then review and enhance them annually at implementation conferences such as COP27 and now COP28.

In this case every member state must meet the commitments it made at COP27 in in Sharm El-Sheikh and adopt new ones set at a stricter standard – which must be backed by a credible plan for implementation. The stocktake that took place last year at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh revealed a disastrous situation, and this could be even worse.

### **The loss and damage fund**

The other massive issue that will rear it head again – and rightly so – is the matter of a so-called “loss and damage fund”.

This fund was agreed in principal in Sharm El-Sheikh after a long and heated debate. It would provide a mechanism by which the rich countries, that are most responsible for climate change, would be required to pay into a fund that could mitigate the impact of climate change on the poor countries, who are the least responsible for climate change, and help them with a just transition to renewable energy. There was no agreement, however, as to how much money should be paid into it, who should pay it, or on what basis. The UNs International Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) was , therefore, asked to prepare a recommendation, particularly on the size of the fund for the COP28 in Dubai.

The creation of such a fund had been blocked by the rich countries for over 30 years and was only forced onto the agenda this year after heavy pressure from the poor (or developing) countries themselves. Prior to COP27 Guterres had argued strongly for such an agreement, warning that unless there is what he called an “historic pact” between the rich and poor countries on this issue, the planet could already be doomed. In other words without a serious loss and damage fund

to provide a socially and economic transition the UN will eventually, and inevitably, fail.

This issue has been given a substantial boost on the eve of the summit when 70 international figures led by Gordon Brown, and including former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, have sent a letter to the COP calling for the massive revenues of oil-producing states to be subject to a \$25bn levy to help pay for the impact of climate disasters on the world's [poorest and most vulnerable people](#).

Brown told the Guardian: "The deadlock on climate finance has to be broken if Cop28 is to succeed. After more than a decade of broken promises, a \$25bn oil and gas levy paid by the petrol states and proposed by the UAE as chair of Cop would kickstart finance for mitigation [reduction of greenhouse gas emissions] and adaptation in the global south".

Such a levy, he said, would shave off only a small fraction of the bonanza that oil-producing countries have made in recent years, but it would help to fill the "loss and damage" to poor countries afflicted by the impacts of the climate crisis.

## **The role of the UN**

The state of the climate struggle today can be seen from the following harsh realities:

- the science remains irrefutable (though often understated by the scientific community)
- the time available to reach net zero is rapidly running out
- the limitations of the COP process become ever more apparent
- Anthropogenic global warming is accelerating at an unprecedented rate and dangerous tipping points are fast approaching – some have already arrived.
- The COP process has to be made to work because there is no alternative.

It is a pivotal moment for the UN since faced with such contradictions its entire carbon reduction project is falling apart leaving the global climate to spin out of control and cause more tipping points to trigger – which would be catastrophic for both the UN and the planet.

Many on the radical left argue that this failure was and is inevitable because the UN it is a capitalist institution, and as such is dedicated to the preservation of the fossil industry and prepared to use as much “greenwash” as necessary in order to do so and it is time for the left (however defined) to go it alone. There have been numerous proposals in recent years for the left to denounce the COP process as a road block and withdraw from it.

This would be a big mistake. The UN is, of course, a capitalist institution. It is comprised of 193 capitalist countries: how could it be otherwise. To its great credit, however, it recognised the danger of anthropogenic climate change as early as 1992 when the radical left still regarded the environment as a middle class diversion. Since then the COP process it established has been a battleground between the majority who recognise the problem and are prepared to decarbonise at least to some extent, and those who simply defend their own self-interest or who reject the concept of anthropogenic global warming on ideological grounds – i.e. the climate change deniers.

In the event the UN – along with its subdivisions such as the IPCC – were not only successful in defeating the climate deniers – despite the massive backing they received from the fossil fuel producers – but in winning the scientific community over to the climate struggle, without which we would be nowhere today. It has also been instrumental, along with the intensification of the climate crisis its self – in transforming global awareness as to the dangers of climate change.

Today we are facing an existential climate emergency, which only the UN, or something with a comparable global reach and authority can successfully confront.

This is important since although the struggle against climate change must include individual responsibility, in the end it is only governmental action—and ultimately governments that are prepared to go on a war footing to do so—that can make the structural changes necessary to stop global warming in the few years that science is giving us to do it.

### **The role of the radical left**

To the extent that the radical left in particular had or has a strategic approach by which to global warming and climate change it is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, though how clearly this has been thought through is not always clear. To be relevant to global warming, however, it would have to happen within this decade since nothing can be built on a dead planet.

The actual task we are faced with today, therefore, is not whether global capitalism can be abolished within 10 years, but whether it can be forced to take action to halt global warming

as a part of a struggle for its eventual overturn and its replacement by an ecosocialism. If we are unable to build the kind of movement capable of forcing major change under capitalism, how are we going to build a movement capable of overturning it. It is what I would call a transitional approach.

It is not true – as some on the left imply – that capitalism cannot be forced to make major changes that are contrary to the logic of its existence. In fact it was already making concessions to this when it agreed under extreme pressure to support a maximum global temperature increase of 1.5°C in Paris and when it agreed to end the use of fossil fuels in

Glasgow.

Capitalism would also be prepared, in my view – given the existential implications – involved to carry through decarbonisation its self rather than see societal collapse, since to do so would meet with massive resistance. It would do so completely in its self-interest and with extreme brutality. We cannot assume, in any case, that global warming will be halted incrementally – or indeed peacefully – before runaway climate chaos along with societal and ecological break downs and if so ultra-right and fascist forces will be waiting in the wings.

Mass movements will emerge spontaneously under such conditions, problem however, will be which class interests do they represent. Whether they are led by progressive forces (including the left) ultra-right populists with a reactionary agenda, that are already flexing their muscles around environmental issues.

A major task of the radical left today – as well as being involved in every aspect of the struggle –implies conscious preparation for such an eventuality, which could already happen at any time.

Meanwhile, the most effective way to cut carbon emissions quickly and democratically is by making fossil fuels much more expensive than renewable energy, by means that are socially just, economically redistributive, and capable of commanding popular support – and in the two or three decades that remain to us.

The UN COP process remains a crucial forum in the struggle for such demands remains. It is the best forum through which the global climate movement can place demands on the global elites and the forum around which we can build the kind of mass movement that can force them to take effective action.

Key carbon reduction issues



- The global average surface temperature to below a 5°C increase
- Demand net zero by 2030
- All new fossil fuel investment must be stopped
- The polluters must be made to pay
- Global biodiversity must be defended
- There must be a rapid transition to renewables: including solar, on-shore and off-shore wind, tidal and hydro carried out on a 'war footing'. (In UK Labour must maintain its commitment to £28 billion a year on renewables)
- The 2030 deadline for selling fossil fuel cars must be maintained
- SUVs must be banned other than in specialised circumstances
- Adequate production facilities for EV batteries must be established
- There must be a major extension of public transport and fewer cars
- The national grid must be upgraded

There must be a massive programme of home (and building) insulation. All new homes must meet strict environmental standards

- LTNs and 15 minute cities must be introduced to cut carbon emission and clean up the air we breathe
- Decarbonise agriculture, ban deforestation, a big reduction in meat production and consumption. End the ploughing of fields.
- Stop the pollution of land and sea and rivers
- Protect wetlands
- Far better recycling and the detoxification of waste disposal
- No to nuclear energy

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