

# Climate Change: IPCC recognizes inequality as a key for “climate risk”. But we must go much further than that

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Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change started the publication of its 5<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report (or AR5), initially showing the work by the Working Group I, which deals with the physical basis of climate change. Now, the AR5 process continued with the publication of the “Summary for Policy Makers” by the Working Group II, concerning “impacts, adaptation and vulnerability.”

It is common for the socialist left to neglect the issue of climate change. But this is a very serious mistake. We insist that seeking answers to the central question of the ecological crisis in general (and in particular the climate crisis) is crucial to the struggle of the working classes and the poor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After all, the fight to avoid a catastrophic outcome to this crisis engendered by capitalism is the fight to safeguard the material conditions for survival with dignity of humankind. No Socialism is possible in an isolated country. No Socialism is possible while keeping sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia. Socialism is not possible on a scorched Earth.

## Are IPCC assessments reliable?

They mostly are. The role of the IPCC is to survey the scientific literature, in order to compile the current and most advanced knowledge in the area of climate and its impacts. Their reports are scientific compendia of high quality and of great value, not only for academic purposes. More than that, unlike the myth that climate change deniers attempt to spread, trying to discredit the scientific community, the IPCC reports are anything but “alarmist” or “catastrophist”. Instead, the language is very moderate, conservative and timid, belying the magnitude of the problem they address.

These reports leave no doubt about the extent and depth of the changes that occur in the Earth’s climate system nowadays, nor regarding their causes. The planet is warming, the polar ice caps and glaciers have shrunk, the seas are rising and acidifying, extreme events (heat waves, floods, droughts, hurricanes) have become more frequent and/or intensified. These are facts. Just as it is a fact that there is no other plausible cause for this warming than the excess of greenhouse gases in the Earth’s atmosphere, i.e., CO<sub>2</sub> produced by burning fossil fuels (oil, coal and natural gas), but also methane, nitrous oxide (both associated with agriculture) and halocarbons. In particular, the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> has grown over 40 % since the pre-industrial period (around 280 parts per

million, or ppm) and in a year or two will exceed 400 ppm in the annual average (already in 2014 it will be above this number for several months).

There is a broad consensus within the Climate Science community that an average temperature rise of several degrees will worsen this whole picture so much that Earth's climate may become quite hostile. This almost certainly will become an irreversible path, if global warming surpasses 2°C, which is expected to happen after a concentration of 450 ppm CO<sub>2</sub> is exceeded. It is noteworthy that the projections presented by the IPCC have been confirmed or underestimate the pace of the changes: the reality of rising sea levels and especially the loss of sea ice in the Arctic is much more serious than previously thought.

### **Inequality in emissions, inequality in benefits inequality in impacts**

"All aspects of food security are potentially affected by climate change, including food access, utilization, and price stability"; "Climate change over the 21<sup>st</sup> century is projected to increase displacement of people"; "Climate change can indirectly increase risks of violent conflicts in the form of civil war and inter-group violence by amplifying well-documented drivers of these conflicts such as poverty and economic shocks"; "Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, climate-change impacts are projected to slow down economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, further erode food security, and prolong existing and create new poverty traps, the latter particularly in urban areas and emerging hotspots of hunger".

In these words, the IPCC report on impacts, adaptation and vulnerability identifies as clearly as in no other previous report, the possible breadth and depth of social impacts, recognizing the real possibility of extreme deepening of the problems of hunger, water supply, deaths from severe weather events, migration, conflicts, etc.

The report understands that the impacts on society are a combination of climatic factors and how much you are "exposed" and "vulnerable" to these factors. It is quite obvious that these last two aspects have to do with the deep inequality between rich and poor, between the central capitalist countries and the periphery.

But it is also evident that the report does not go all the way in their conclusions, saying only "transformations in economic, social, technological, and political decisions and actions can enable climate-resilient pathways" (in fact it goes almost nowhere). OK, what transformations are these? What are these pathways? How we can achieve them?

In addition to the unfairness in impacts, climate change is a matter of inequality, of class struggle at its roots. The extraction, sale and use of fossil fuels is dominated by a handful of companies (7 of the 11 largest companies in the world are petrochemical and their total annual revenues surpass France's GDP) and propelled the growth of the capitalist economy, accumulation and concentration to unimaginable levels .

Also, the wealth created based on the energy from fossil sources mostly benefited a minority of countries (mainly Europe and USA) and, of course, a minority within them. These countries have much greater capacity to adapt to the serious problems inevitably arising from the warming of the climate system. Furthermore, the rich within them have much better adaptation potential than the poor. And the gap is only going to widen between global elites and the broad masses in impoverished countries in the periphery of capitalism, indigenous peoples, the African countries and island countries, etc. under a scenario of reduced freshwater availability and agricultural productivity, more floods, droughts and wildfires, increased erosion and coastal flooding. This is a

reality that contrasts sharply with the illusions sold by “green capitalism” (two words that cannot go together), which says that we all inhabit “the same ship”. Of course, this analogy is meaningless, unless it is based on Titanic, whose closed gates prevented third-class passengers from having access to lifeboats, while a good part of the first class escaped.

Finally, the accumulation of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere (along with the chemical and radioactive contamination of the global ecosystem) clearly demonstrates the “metabolic imbalance” between industrial production of material goods and the ability of natural ecosystems to process the wastes from this production.

Recognizing the material on the physical basis of climate change, the IPCC acknowledged the need to impose strict limits on fossil fuel use, to prevent an extremely dangerous and irreversible process, which turns out to be a spiral in which no adaptation is possible. But it does not state how we can enforce those limits, in a situation where the corporations own fossil fuel reserves that, if burned, would be sufficient to massively exceed the barrier of a 2°C global warming (or 450 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>) and still madly open new sources of exploitation, whether the Brazilian pre-salt layer, the Arctic, the Alberta tar sands, Chinese coal or the world-wide gas fracking boom.

### **What policies are needed in face of dramatic climate change?**

The climate crisis cannot be resolved within the framework of “market solutions”: far from it.

The so-called “carbon market”, in which the “right to emit/pollute” is treated as a commodity, was revealed as a total deceit. It does not make sense, given the necessary large-scale and accelerated restriction in emissions, to sell a “right” that no one has. It is not much than a ploy to allow big capitalists in the core countries to benefit from preferential treatment compared to peripheral countries. As in any minimally fair agreement, restrictions on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the central capitalist countries must be much higher.

Regarding energy policy, it is also not possible to bet on false solutions like the construction of large dams (which, in addition to the emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and methane due to the decomposition of organic material in the flooded area, produce a number of other deleterious socio-environmental impacts) or nuclear power (which is not renewable, produces waste that remains radioactive and dangerous for long periods, risks accidents such as Fukushima, and may promote the proliferation of nuclear weapons).

Also it is not sufficient to introduce renewable sources (wind, solar) in the energy matrix. Today, in most cases, they have simply been added to the matrix as part of the “eternal growth” of capital, rather than replacing fossil (and nuclear) power plants. Moreover, it is common that renewables are being adopted following the capitalist pseudo-rationality, sparking conflicts with traditional populations and/or damaging coastal ecosystems, such as the shoreline zone of Northeast Brazil.

For a successful exit strategy for the climate crisis, one needs to move beyond blending renewable sources generated in medium and large units (already installed hydropower, wave power, tidal, geothermal, wind and solar). Even adopting strict measures to minimize its impacts, they are often distant from the consumption site, leading to losses in transmission lines and other problems. Thus, one must invest in a decentralized system in which cities generate a significant portion of the energy they consume, with a large contribution from solar photovoltaic generation at domestic/small scale (an association of producers/consumers, or a “solar communism”).

Concerning transportation, the replacement of diesel and gasoline-powered vehicles, by agrifuel-

powered ones or even by electric cars does not offer the slightest mirage of a decent solution. Corn and sugarcane ethanol as well as a large variety of biodiesel sources often come from monoculture and agribusiness, with strong effects on food security, invasion of small landowners, indigenous peoples and traditional communities, massive use of pesticides and fertilizers. The benefits of electric cars become clearly limited if electricity continues to be generated mostly by coal power plants (whose environmental impacts include not only CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but also those from mining and other pollutants) and if traffic congestion is not addressed. The perspective is to break up the paradigm of individual transportation altogether, combining the struggle for free movement and the defense of mobility and urban quality of life, promoting a radical turn towards public, free, high-quality, non-pollutant, collective transportation combined with other modalities (e.g. bicycles) to serve the interests of the majority and at the same time drastically reducing the associated emissions.

It is clear that production by sectors such as fossil fuel industry, the automobile industry (not to mention the armaments industry), contributing to the myth of “GDP growth”, identified as an increase in overall wealth and, worse, life quality, must be completely reorganized, so that they turn to meet the needs of restructuring the energy and transport infrastructure. We need to show that a real protection of workers’ job security dwells in a thorough, profound shift about what is produced and how, along with a fundamental change from private, vertical, authoritarian capitalist management to collective, common, radically democratic socialist decision-making.

Given that most of the fossil reserves must remain untouched, a measure to be taken is the immediate expropriation of all fossil fuel companies as collective property with democratic management by society. In parallel, it is necessary that agriculture shifts from agribusiness to family farming and other small-scale food production, such as urban farming cooperatives, backyard gardens, etc., with strong encouragement to agriculture free of chemical fertilizers (great source of nitrous oxide, the third greenhouse gas in importance, behind CO<sub>2</sub> and methane). Deforestation, still the major source of emissions in many tropical countries, needs not only to get down to zero, but to be reversed by the recovery of degraded areas.

### **Is eco-socialism a petit-bourgeois thing? Is ecology the opium of the people?**

Of course we disagree with any assertion of this type, but we regret that some who claim a “left” political position (or worse, a “radical left” position) spout this type of nonsense. Unfortunately, it shows that opinions that combine ignorance and bigotry and distance themselves completely from the concrete reality of capitalism in the twenty-first century are very much present amongst socialists.

The ecological crisis (of which the climate crisis is the most global expression) is a manifestation of a stage of capitalist development in which it advances over the last expanding frontiers possible within the Earth, in search of the resources it devours in the industrial process. Doing so, it exceeds natural limits and preys on the environment that sustains human society as if it were boundless. At the same time, it becomes more violent, as it inveighs unambiguously against the “obstacles to development” (indigenous people who “disturb” the expansion of agribusiness or mining, or poor populations located in places sought by construction and land speculation, in the cities).

The radical socialist left is very much aware that, in order to promote substantial changes in society, occupying positions in the bourgeois state (bureaucratic, impermeable to popular participation, with elections dominated by economic power, corrupt, structurally constituted to serve the ruling classes) is not even close to a solution. But for a large sector claiming this political position, the perception

that the state apparatus is not neutral and that one cannot just put it to work “in the service of workers” is not extended to the productive base of society. The transition to socialism would take place mainly (or mostly) via the simple exchange of ownership of the mean of production, putting them to “produce in the workers’ interests” as if technologies, methods of work organization, options for energy sources, etc. were neutral.

This is false. In addition to the more obvious contradictions (the armaments industry, for example), not all production now reigning in capitalism should be maintained, qualitatively (what to produce) or quantitatively (how much to produce). In the long term, Socialism should not produce goods that lead to environmental and climatic imbalance as we have now under capitalism, as this puts into question the permanence of our own species. It must be clear that fossil fuels and nuclear power have no place in a socialist society. The logic of overproduction of luxuries and planned obsolescence must also be overcome and the volume of production of material goods itself must respect the limits imposed by the flows of matter and energy in the Earth system. This involves the recycling of waste from the production process and replacement of materials and energy resources available for so that production in a sustained manner. The mere substitution of property relations without advancing this set of issues (and also in human relationships beyond the terrain of work and production, where prejudice and oppression, incompatible with Socialism, stubbornly reside), given the depth of the revolutionary changes needed, appears as a veneer of reform, rather than genuine social revolution!

One cannot reconcile capitalism and sustainability, but it is not permissible, for the sake of immediate and long-term interest of the social majorities, to have Socialism not address the ecological issues as central. This is a necessary reckoning, not only with global ecocide promoted now by capitalism, but also with environmental disasters (Chernobyl, the Aral Sea, lakes of Siberia) perpetrated by the same “actually existing socialism” that murdered revolutionary leaders, massacred ethnic groups and created indecent bureaucratic privileges. Ecosocialism, in this sense, appears as a strategic goal for the revolutionary left that is in tune with the needs of the twenty-first century. It is far more radical than traditional and dogmatic “left” thinking supposes it is.

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*LINKS:*

IPCC Physical Basis Summary for Policy Makers:

[http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/report/WG1AR5\\_SPM\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/report/WG1AR5_SPM_FINAL.pdf)

IPCC Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability Summary for Policy Makers:

[http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/IPCC\\_WG2AR5\\_SPM\\_Approved.pdf](http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/IPCC_WG2AR5_SPM_Approved.pdf)

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\* <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>