

After Bali: Time for a Different Kind of Climate Politics

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"We are ending up with something so watered down there was no need for 12,000 people to gather here in Bali to have a watered-down text. We could have done that by email." —Dr. Angus Friday, Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States

In a narrow and formal sense, last month's Climate Change conference in Bali achieved its objectives. The Kyoto Protocol is due to expire in 2012: the Bali gathering's purpose was to adopt a roadmap for negotiating a new treaty — and that was done. A new roadmap, called the Bali Action Plan, was adopted unanimously at an overtime session, after the USA withdrew its objections.

As the *New York Times* pointed out, the dramatic U.S. capitulation really didn't amount to much: "From the United States the delegates got nothing, except a promise to participate in the forthcoming negotiations." [1]

That's why the Bali meetings were a failure in any meaningful sense. They didn't even discuss the Kyoto Protocol's failure to produce results, failed to recognize the need for rapid action, and above all failed to adopt (or even recommend) any targets for emission reductions. The final resolution might better be called the Bali Inaction Plan — at best it is an agreement to discuss further, and maybe agree in 2009 on measures that might be implemented after 2012.

As an observer from the Institute for Policy Studies writes:

"The Bali 'action plan' does almost nothing to ensure that the people most affected by the worst impacts of climate change will receive the resources needed to survive impending climate chaos. This transition plan for replacing the Kyoto Protocol, which is so far being called the "Bali mandate," instead entrenches the power of big business, and the global financial institutions that work on its behalf, without committing any government to tangible emissions reductions." [2]

Expanding CDM

The only concrete measure approved in Bali was a plan to take one of Kyoto's worst features — the so-called Clean Development Mechanism — and make it worse. Under CDM, major polluters in the industrialized countries can avoid reducing emissions in their home countries by investing in "clean"

projects in the Third World. Morally, this is bizarre — the modern equivalent of paying the medieval church to be forgiven for sins. Worse, the CDM process is often corrupt, providing credits (and profits) for projects that don't reduce emissions, or that would have been carried out anyway.

The Bali delegates approved a World Bank plan to add deforestation to the list of CDM options. As Simone Lavera, the managing coordinator of Global Forest Coalition, points out:

"The World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility ... presents an easy way of pretending to be generous and contributing to tropical forest conservation ... [It] encourages potentially unwilling developing countries to include their forests in the international carbon market after 2012, providing donor countries with access to an abundance of cheap credits that help them avoid painful emission reductions in their own countries." [3]

The World Bank deforestation plan will encourage the enclosure and privatization of forests, overriding indigenous land rights claims and calls for land reform. The indigenous and other poor people who live in and depend on the forests will be pushed out, so that Third World governments and forestry companies can sell credits representing trees that they promise not to cut down.

This plan is clearly another example of the practices condemned by Third World activists in the Durban Declaration of 2004, when they pointed out that CDM projects "appropriate land, water and air already supporting the lives and livelihoods of local communities for new carbon dumps for Northern industries." [4]

Canada's Role

No one familiar with the Harper government's record will be surprised that Canada played a particularly appalling role in the Bali talks. Working closely with the USA and Japan, the Canadian delegation did its utmost to eliminate action from the Bali Action Plan. Ottawa's alignment with the Bush crew reached absurd proportions: Environment Minister Baird even copied his Washington mentors by holding out to the last minute and then dramatically withdrawing his objections so that the vote could be unanimous.

The U.S.-Canada do-nothing position was counterposed to a policy that wasn't much better. The European Union, which is less dependent on coal and oil than its North American competitors, initially proposed to mention (not decide on) emission targets at the low end of what scientists say is essential. They see such targets as the royal road to windfall profits from carbon trading and clean development schemes. The poorest people and countries are pressured into making development choices determined not by their own needs, but by the desire of corporations in the north to avoid cutting emissions.

But when the U.S.-Canada-Japan axis objected, the EU quickly capitulated, replacing all mention of targets with a footnote reference to an IPCC document.

The Canadian Youth Climate Coalition sent a delegation of 21 young people to Bali, in the sincere belief that a strong and idealistic lobbying voice would make a difference. One student participant, using the web-name "jodafoe," reported on the experience in the CYCC blog:

"I felt despair because of Canada's climate change policy and the behaviour of its delegation, which served as a diplomatic wrecking ball to the process of international collective action. Minister Baird's flippancy towards the issue was made clear to me when he refused to meet with the Canadian Youth Delegation, or appear at his own side-event to justify our national climate change

plan, or when his press secretary told that me that our petition of 60,000 signatures was insubstantial.

"I am not an expert of politics but my first foray into the field has been far from welcoming. If this is politics, I want nothing to do with it." [5]

Needed: A Different Kind of Politics

Jodafoe is absolutely correct: if what happened in the conference rooms in Bali defines politics, then climate activists should have nothing to do with it.

But there is another kind of politics, and it too was represented in Bali — not in the official meetings, but in outside events and meetings that used the Bali event as an organizing opportunity and a springboard to action. There were many such activities, but two stand out as particularly important.

- Climate Justice Now! A meeting of 21 organizations that represent affected communities, indigenous peoples, women and peasant farmers, mainly from the Third World, agreed to create Climate Justice Now!, a coalition to improve communication and intensify actions to prevent and respond to climate change. Their initial statement concludes:

"Inside the negotiations, the rich industrialized countries have put unjustifiable pressure on Southern governments to commit to emissions' reductions. At the same time, they have refused to live up to their own legal and moral obligations to radically cut emissions and support developing countries' efforts to reduce emissions and adapt to climate impacts. Once again, the majority world is being forced to pay for the excesses of the minority.

"Compared to the outcomes of the official negotiations, the major success of Bali is the momentum that has been built towards creating a diverse, global movement for climate justice.

"We will take our struggle forward not just in the talks, but on the ground and in the streets — Climate Justice Now!" [6]

We can't tell whether either of these projects will win broad support or play a key role in building a global climate action movement. What is clear is that both point in the right direction, to a different kind of politics: away from backroom lobbying, and toward the mobilization of mass sentiment and action against global warming.

Towards a Movement Against Climate Change

Canada has one of the worst records in the world for greenhouse gas emissions. That fact alone places special responsibility on activists in this country to confront our own government, to demand that it take immediate action to reduce emissions at home and to support climate justice for the countries and peoples who are most harmed by Canadian capitalist irresponsibility.

The beginnings of a broad movement against Canada's climate change policies can be seen in the wide variety of actions that have taken place across the country in the past year.

Marches and rallies such as those held on December 8 in cities across Canada.

Sit-ins and occupations like the Sharbot Lake action against uranium mining.

Smaller "guerrilla theatre" actions designed to attract media coverage and expose particular abuses.

Teach-ins and other educational events such as the sustainability conferences that are being held on several university campuses this winter.

It's much too early to say which forms of protest will prove most effective in building a movement. Our responsibility today is to participate wholeheartedly in actions as they develop, to provide concrete support, and to learn from the nascent movement's experiences.

Independent Action — For A People's Agenda

It's very like that there will be a federal election in 2008. Climate change activists will adopt different positions, some favoring abstention, others supporting the NDP, the Green Party, or specific individual candidates. This will offer many opportunities for debate and discussion, opportunities that should be eagerly welcomed. Our stress throughout should be on the need to build an independent movement that demands concrete action from politicians and parties of all political stripes.

To confront politicians and policy makers effectively, the green movement needs to advance its own People's Agenda on Climate Change, a program that stresses both reducing emissions in Canada and advancing climate justice around the world. The specific details of such an agenda need to be worked out collaboratively by a wide range of activists, but the following are some of the demands we might raise.

The experts in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have called for emission reductions of 25%-40% below 1990 levels by 2020, and 50%-85% by 2050. Regardless of what happens in international negotiations, Canada should unilaterally adopt and implement those targets.

Emissions-trading plans and carbon-tax schemes are actually highly regressive taxes that mostly fall on poor people. Instead, Canada should impose hard limits on the emissions produced by the largest resource and energy companies. [7]

As the Climate Justice Now Coalition points out, the only really effective way to cut emissions is to leave fossil fuels in the ground. In Canada this means immediately stopping all expansion of the tar sands - and then shutting them down quickly. Greenpeace has rightly called the tar sands the "biggest global warming crime in history." Stopping that crime must be a priority.

Military spending and the federal budget surplus should be immediately redirected into public energy-saving projects such as expanding mass transit and retrofitting homes and office buildings. Tar sands workers and redeployed soldiers can play key roles in this effort.

Canada must recognize its ecological debt to the Third World and to indigenous peoples. Paying that debt means cleaning up the damage that Canada's capitalists have caused, providing concrete assistance in adapting to climate change, and transferring the resources and technology needed for clean economic development.

The Bali conference failed to adopt effective measures against climate change: a treaty based on the Bali decisions would be worse than Kyoto. But Bali may also be remembered as the beginning point for a revitalized global movement for climate action and climate justice.

P.S.

* Ian Angus is the editor of Climate and Capitalism (<http://climateandcapitalism.com/>). He will be the

keynote speaker at a conference organized by the University of British Columbia student environment centre on Saturday January 19. He will also participate in a panel on "After Bali: Can Global Warming Be Stopped?" organized by the Vancouver Socialist Forum on Sunday January 20. For details on these events see <http://climateandcapitalism.com/?p=314>

Footnotes

[1] "Editorial: Disappointments on Climate." *New York Times*, December 17, 2007. On ESSF: [Disappointments on Climate](#)

[2] Janet Redman. "Bali's Business-As-Usual Mandate." *Foreign Policy in Focus*, December 24, 2007. On ESSF: [Bali's Business-As-Usual Mandate](#)

[3] Simone Lovera. "Reducing deforestation under the Climate Convention: funding forests, plantations or foresters?" *Europe solidaire sans frontières*. December 17, 2007: [Reducing deforestation under the Climate Convention: funding forests, plantations or foresters?](#) .

[4] Durban Group for Climate Justice. "Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading." October 10, 2004. See: [The Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading](#)

[5] Jodafoe. "Youth Rising: A Reflection on the Bali Conference." *It's Getting Hot In Here*, January 2, 2008.

[6] Climate Justice Now Coalition. "What's missing from the climate talks? Justice!" *Europe solidaire sans frontières*, December 14, 2007.: [What's missing from the climate talks? Justice!](#)]

- People's Protocol on Climate Change. While the official meetings droned on, activists from Indonesia, the Philippines and Australia met elsewhere in Bali, in the town of Sumber Klampok, to draft a People's Protocol on Climate Change, which they plan to use as a focus for worldwide organizing and discussion in the coming year, leading up to the next major UN meeting on climate change, in Poland in December.

The Draft People's Protocol says that the Kyoto Protocol has not merely failed to reduce emissions, it has "*diminished responsibility and accountability for the climate crisis through the marketization of energy resources and supply.*"

"The Kyoto Protocol does not truly involve grassroots communities and peoples who are worst-affected, especially in the South. It has grossly neglected the severe damage to their livelihoods, well-being and welfare. It does not consistently and coherently adhere to the vital developmental principles, especially people's sovereignty over natural resources....

"Climate change must be understood not merely as an environmental issue but as a question of social justice; its causes are rooted in the current capitalist-dominated global economy which is principally driven by the relentless drive for private profits and accumulation."

The document includes a hard-hitting list of demands, and commits to "*building on the powerful networks of movements for climate action that have emerged worldwide.*" [["Peoples Protocol on Climate Change (Draft)." *Climate and Capitalism*, December 28, 2007. On ESSF: [People's Protocol on Climate Change \(Draft\)](#)

[7] For an excellent critique of "green tax" and "cap and trade" policies, see Dick Nichols, "Can Green Taxes Save the World?". See on ESSF: [Can green taxes save the environment?](#)