

When the Climate Change Center Cannot Hold

Monday 26 October 2009, by [BOND Patrick](#) (Date first published: 25 October 2009).

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On a day that 350.org [1] and thousands of allies are valiantly trying to raise global consciousness about impending catastrophe, we can ask some tough questions about what to do after people depart and the props are packed up. No matter today's activism, global climate governance is grid-locked and it seems clear that no meaningful deal can be sealed in Copenhagen on December 18.

The recent Bangkok negotiations of Kyoto Protocol Conference of Parties functionaries confirmed that Northern states and their corporations won't make an honest effort to get to 350 CO₂ parts per million. On the right, Barack Obama's negotiators seem to feel that the 1997 Kyoto Protocol is excessively binding to the North, and leaves out several major polluters of the South, including China, India, Brazil and South Africa.

Kyoto's promised 5% emissions cuts (by 2012, from 1990 levels) are impossible now. Obama's people hope the world will accept 2005 as a new starting date; a 20% reduction by 2020 then only brings the target back to around 5% below 1990 levels. Such pathetically low ambitions, surely Obama knows, guarantee a runaway climate catastrophe - he should shoot for 45%, say the small island nations.

The other reason Kyoto is ridiculed by serious environmentalists is its provision for carbon trading rackets which allow fake claims of net emissions cuts. Since the advent of the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme, the Chicago exchange, Clean Development Mechanism projects and offsets, vast evidence has accumulated of systemic market failure, scamming and inability to regulate carbon trading (see a website launched today 350reasons.org [2]).

A final reason we need to rapidly transcend Kyoto's weak, market-oriented approach is that devastation caused by climate change will hit the world's poorest, most vulnerable people far harder than those in the North. Reparations for the North's climate debt to the South are in order. The European Union offered a pittance in September, while African leaders are stiffening their spines for a fight in Copenhagen reminiscent of Seattle a decade ago.

Since discussing this threat six weeks ago in a ZNet column, subsequent Bangkok negotiations and web traffic offered me a sobering reminder of Northern stubbornness, on two fronts - those whose interests are mainly in short-term capital accumulation, but also the mainstream environmentalists who are only beginning to grasp the huge strategic error they made in Kyoto.

Negotiating the Environment

In the first camp, Obama's people are hoping non-binding national-level plans will be acceptable at Copenhagen. But their case is weaker because at home, the two main proposed bills - Waxman-Markey which passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and Kerry-Boxer which is under Senate consideration - will do far more harm than good.

Don't take it from me; the best source is Congressman Rich Boucher, from a coal-dominated Southwestern Virginia district. Boucher supported Waxman-Markey, he told a reporter last month [3], precisely because it would not adversely affect his corporate constituencies. The two billion tons of offset allowances in the legislation mean that "an electric utility burning coal will not have to reduce the emissions at the plant site," chortled Boucher. "It can just keep burning coal."

Boucher was one of the congressional rednecks who wrecked Obama's promise to sell - not give away - the carbon credits, and then bragged to his district's main newspaper, the Times News, that "this helps to keep electricity prices affordable and strengthens the case for utilities to continue to use coal."

Boucher and company are also working hard to disempower the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) from regulating CO₂. This was accomplished in Waxman-Markey, and upon introducing his legislation, Senator John Kerry gave the game away by noting EPA regulatory authority is not gutted in his bill now, only so that it can be gutted later, so as to provide "some negotiating room as we proceed forward."

The Senate bill has all manner of other objectionable components, which hard-working activists from Climate SOS, Rising Tide North America, Friends of the Earth, the Center for Biological Diversity, Biofuelwatch and Greenwash Guerrillas have been hammering at.

Hence in the U.S., the balance of forces is fluid. On the far-right, the fossil fuels industries are intent on making Obama's climate legislation farcical - and have so far succeeded. In the centre, the main establishment 'green' agencies - such as the Environmental Defense Fund and Natural Resources Defence Council - are plowing ahead with carbon trading strategies, hoping to salvage some legitimacy for Obama, because these bills are a 'first step' to more serious emissions reduction, they claim.

Yet U.S. negotiators will go to Copenhagen (as they did in Bangkok and will next month in Barcelona) with the aim of smashing any residual benefit of the Kyoto Protocol - such as potential binding cuts with accountability mechanisms - and then allow these U.S. dynamics to play out in a manner that locks in climate disaster.

So just as in 1997, when Al Gore introduced carbon trading into the initial deal - and subsequently broke an implicit promise by failing to get the U.S. (under both Clinton and Bush) to ratify the Protocol - there is every likelihood that if an agreement in Copenhagen were reached, it would be as worthless as Kyoto.

Which brings us to quandaries faced by two other forces: the ordinary environmentalist in the U.S. - perhaps a typical fan of useful *grist* blogs [4] - and activists based in the so-called Third World who have to deal with the most adverse impacts of climate chaos in coming decades.

Grist's Jonathan Hiskes recently reacted to the first dilemma by characterizing Goddard Institute for Space Studies director James Hansen - the most celebrated U.S. climate scientist - as "especially troublesome." Hansen not only put his body on the line this year in a high-profile arrest at a West

Virginia coal generator, and testified repeatedly against carbon trading, but also endorsed Climate SOS, to Hiskes' dismay.

Why rail against Hansen? Hiskes claims that when describing Obama's bills as "worse than nothing," Hanson and other 'no-compromise types' ignore "the historical precedent of legislation that is deeply flawed at first evolving into something effective and durable. The original Clean Air Act did not address the acid rain crisis, an omission not corrected until 1990. The original Social Security Act did not include domestic or agricultural workers, effectively excluding many Hispanic, black, and immigrant workers."

The obvious difference is that those two laws empowered environmentalists and workers against enemies. They had universalizing potential and could be incrementally expanded. In contrast, Obama's climate legislation is so far off on the wrong track - by commodifying the air as the core climate strategy and empowering the fossil fuel industries - that the train cannot be steered away from its over-the-cliff route. Just let it crash.

(Oh bummer, the same seems to be true of 2009 legislation and fiscal programs for the economy and healthcare, which empower banksters, derivative financiers, energy firms, insurers and others who caused the problems in the first place.)

The second force caught in the quandary of climate politics is Penang-based Third World Network (TWN) and its many admirers, who insisted at Bangkok that the Kyoto Protocol be retained because, first, at least it offers the possibility of a binding framework, and second, countries not presently liable under Kyoto should still have the right to increase emissions so as to 'develop.'

I'll grant the first point, for if U.S. negotiators block Kyoto's extension, then national-level agreements could indeed be much weaker. On the other hand, if the EPA actually used its powers to reduce the top 7500 or so largest point-sources of U.S. carbon pollution, that would be far stronger than carbon trading legislation which lets polluters off the hook.

The main problem with TWN's 'development' argument is that a great deal of CO₂-emitting economic activity and resource extraction in the Third World are better considered 'maldevelopment' - and for environmental, socio-economic and moral reasons should halt.

Here in South Africa, a long-term (apartheid-era) state relationship to the so-called 'minerals-energy complex' generated a political bloc so powerful that it is now in the process of building \$100-billion in new coal-fired and nuclear plants. Their strategy is to keep offering the cheapest electricity in the world to UK/Australian (formerly SA) mining/metals firms, including Anglo, BHP Billiton, Lonplats and Arcellor-Mittal.

By way of background, state supplier Eskom lost \$1.3-billion last year gambling on aluminum futures. Forty percent of SA's CO₂ emissions can be traced to a handful of the largest firms, including the dangerous oil-from-coal/gas operator Sasol. And cheap electricity for the mining/metals firms contrasts with wickedly-high price hikes (a 250% projection from 2008-11) for ordinary people, which in turn contributes to the intense demonstrations now destabilizing dozens of municipalities [5].

Moreover, as corporations export profits and dividends to London/Melbourne headquarters, our vast balance of payments deficit gives The Economist magazine cause to rate South Africa the world's riskiest emerging market. In sum, it is impossible to argue that SA's world-leading per capita CO₂ emissions represents 'development.'

One way to address this maldevelopment - especially from exports of CO₂-intensive minerals and cash crops, as well as manufactured goods transported by air and ship - is import/export taxation.

French president Nicolas Sarkozy proposed a small import tariff (the equivalent of 4 cents per litre of petrol) last month: "Most importantly, a carbon tax at the borders is vital for our industries and our jobs." In the U.S., the energy secretary and organized labour are also making noises along these lines.

Sarkozy's small incremental tax will not change consumption patterns. Explains Soumya Dutta from the People's Science Movement, "In India, a far less affluent society, whenever gasoline or diesel prices are raised by even 6-10%, there is an initial hue and cry. Within a month, things settle down and the consumption keeps growing - invariably."

The South Centre's Martin Khor condemns Sarkozy's move as 'climate protectionism,' remarking, "It would be sad if the progressive movement were to support and join in the attempts by those who want to block off products from developing countries in the name of climate change." He is correct to label such taxes "self-interested and selfish bullying acts."

More generally, says Khor, "We shouldn't give the powerful countries an excuse and legitimacy to use climate or labour or social issues to block our exports and get away with it through a nice sounding excuse."

Of course, the details of the French strategy, and indeed its protectionist orientation, must be criticized. But the most crucial factor when imposing any kind of sanctions - whether a carbon tax or trade sanctions against Burmese regime or Zimbabwe's main ruling party - is the consent of those affected who are themselves struggling for change, a point Sarkozy hasn't factored in.

An Alternate Strategy for Copenhagen

How might one? Turning a carbon tax into a positive funding flow for the Third World is a suggestion by Daphne Wysham of the Institute for Policy Studies. Proceeds should go directly to the countries whose products are being taxed, for the purposes of explicit greenhouse gas reduction.

These nuances in national-level strategic debates should be tackled by Northern activists bearing in mind the Global South's genuine development aspirations.

Regardless, core principles of the progressive movement are non-negotiable. In advance of Copenhagen Bella Center protests, here are demands articulated by Climate Justice Action:

- leaving fossil fuels in the ground;
- reasserting peoples' and community control over production;
- relocalising food production;
- massively reducing overconsumption, particularly in the North;
- respecting indigenous and forest peoples' rights; and
- recognising the ecological and climate debt owed to the peoples of the South and making reparations.

If the center is not holding, that's fine: the wave of courageous direct-action protests against climate criminals in recent weeks - and the prospect of 'Seattling' Copenhagen on December 16 - is an inspiring reflection of left pressure that will soon counteract that from the right. It's our only hope, isn't it.

P.S.

* From The Bullet, Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 265,
October 25, 2009.

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.350.org/>

[2] <http://www.350reasons.org/>

[3] http://www.timesnews.net/print_article.php?id=9016458

[4] <http://www.grist.org/>

[5] Tthe Centre for Civil Society documents these daily in our Social Protest Observatory, at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs