

Unites States: Climate Crisis and the Presidential Candidates

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Hurricane Dorian hit the Bahamas, a small nation on a series of islands east and south of the Florida peninsula, as a category 5 storm with 185 miles-per-hour winds. It stalled there for two days as a category 4, utterly destroying over 13,000 homes.

Storm surges and heavy rains added to the carnage.

Scenes of the destruction have been shown on TV worldwide, revealing the rubble in what seems like the result of a massive bombing.

It is not known how many people lie dead under the wreckage, but hundreds, maybe more, are unaccounted for, and the death toll, which was 50 at the latest count, is expected to rise dramatically.

This was the backdrop for a CNN special, where the top ten Democratic Party presidential candidates were interviewed one by one on the subject of climate change. The Democratic National Committee (DNC), which organizes the televised debates between the candidates, had previously rejected holding a debate on the subject.

Before discussing what the Democratic candidates said, it is useful to go over President Trump's record, as well as his reaction to Hurricane Dorian.

As to the latter, Trump at first said he never heard of a Category 5 Hurricane, and questioned whether such existed. Then while the Bahamas were being flattened, he sought to divert the discussion with a bizarre prediction that the state of Alabama would be hit. This was in the face of U.S. and European weather services projections that after leaving the Bahamas the hurricane would graze the east coast of the U.S., going north, which is what it did.

When he made his prediction, the National Weather Service station in Alabama said that there was no danger of Alabama, not on the coast, being hit.

While it weakened and didn't make a direct hit, Dorian created large storm surges on the beaches and heavy rains, causing floods, and some wind damage as it moved up the coast.

In an even more bizarre contention, Trump not only didn't admit his foray into weather forecasting was wrong, he has continued to insist that Alabama was in danger of being hit by the hurricane.

The National Weather Service is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which is under the Commerce Department.

To buttress Trump's assertion, Wilbur Ross, the Secretary of Commerce, threatened to fire the scientists who contradicted Trump. This then led the NOAA to issue a statement "disavowing the National Weather Service's position that Alabama was not at risk," according to the New York Times.

Why does Trump continue with all this? I can make some guesses. One, he insists on loyalty to him personally at all levels of government, and no agency has the right to contradict him. Two, he wants to change the subject from dealing with the catastrophic destruction of the Bahamas. Three, he wants to cast doubt on scientists who say climate change is real.

Trump, as candidate and then as president, has insisted that climate change and global warming caused by the burning of fossil fuels is a hoax perpetrated by China. He does this to justify his campaign to further unleash the fossil fuel (coal, oil and natural gas) industry by having his Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) systematically repeal regulations on the industry which curtail greenhouse gas emissions, a bit.

Trump's EPA should be renamed the Environmental Destruction Agency for its drive to repeal not only these regulations, but others in support of the environment.

Trump's response to what's happened to the Bahamas is not anywhere near commensurate with the need. A major mobilization of material and human resources by the U.S. is what must be done to get the cleanup done, and then to help the islands to rebuild. Aside from some help from the coast Guard, that is not being done or even contemplated.

Trump doesn't believe in helping other countries facing disasters.

Some hundreds of Bahamian survivors have asked for temporary asylum in the U.S. to help them rebuild their lives. Trump has refused, using the same racist charges he has used against asylum seekers at the Mexican border: they are criminals, gangsters, drug dealers, etc. he says.

Moreover, they are largely people with black skins. Trump's attitude toward brown-skinned people is evident at the Mexican border as well as in his deliberate failure to provide anywhere near adequate aid to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria devastated the U.S. colony.

Trump's pressure is evident on the media coverage of Dorian. TV meteorologists, who did tell us that Dorian rapidly increased from a tropical storm into a Category 5 hurricane due to warm ocean temperatures. But in almost all broadcasts refused to say when asked, that this was related to global warming. In fact, the phrases "global warming" and "climate change" were barely ever mentioned in the coverage of Dorian.

Unlike Trump, the Democratic candidates interviewed by CNN acknowledge that climate change is real and is an existential threat to not only the U.S. but human civilization.

Coal burning wasn't discussed much, as that industry is in decline. Most wanted to put a moratorium on new oil and gas leases. Differences emerged over natural gas (methane). Bernie Sanders went the furthest, calling for a ban on fracking for natural gas, an industry that thrived under Obama. Sanders was then supported by Kamela Harris and Elizabeth Warren. Others were not sure, except for Joe Biden, the preferred candidate of the Democratic establishment, who was opposed to a ban.

Some of the candidates supported nuclear power as part of the answer, and other equivocated. Bernie Sanders flatly opposed nuclear power. The major long-term danger of nuclear power is that its waste is highly radioactive and stays radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years, posing a cumulative danger for future generations.

"It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me to add more dangerous waste to this country and the world when we don't know how to get rid of what we have now," Sanders said.

There are also the dangers in the short term of catastrophic accidents. The most recent being the

reactor meltdown at the Fukushima reactors in Japan.

Most of the candidates support some form of putting a price on carbon emissions, in the hope that “the market” would solve the problem. One idea is to tax carbon emissions. Such a tax would have to be quite high, far beyond what any of the candidate who support such a tax propose, to force power companies to stop using fossil fuels by 2030, a target for many of the candidates. That’s the target date scientists have set for eliminating greenhouse gas emissions to avoid climate catastrophe, let alone 2050, the target date for some of the candidates.

But those utilities produce only 28 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. Taxing the remaining 72 percent at the high rate necessary would largely fall on transportation, including on the gasoline workers use in their cars. It would also fall on trucks, trains, airplanes and ships, greatly raising the cost of transporting goods, including food. Such high taxes which would take effect now, before a transfer to emissions-free transportation could be built, so this idea won’t work in time to avoid climate catastrophe.

Another proposal is to allow polluting companies to continue to pollute by supporting (“trading with”) industries that don’t pollute, an idea climate activists reject as absurd.

The candidates by and large acknowledge that the costs of transitioning to a carbon-free economy while protecting workers affected and dealing with the results of the already dire situation are very high. How to raise that money is only vaguely approached.

Sanders did propose that some of this money could come from the nearly one trillion dollars a year the Democrats and Republicans have overwhelmingly approved for the military.

Sanders is also the only one calling for the nationalization of the public utility companies.

Even if the Democrats win the presidency, the Senate, and the House in 2020, it is unlikely that the best of these plans would get through Congress, given that a significant number of Democratic politicians and almost all Republicans would oppose them or water them down to ineffectiveness.

There is another candidate running, Howie Hawkins, who is vying to become the Green Party candidate for president.

Hawkins was pleased to see Democratic candidates putting forward climate plans, but said none go far enough. “Even the best plan announced by Senator Sanders, fails to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions fast enough for climate safety. His cuts to the military, the largest climate polluter, are insufficient and vague. I am calling for a 75 percent cut in military spending to redirect major financial, physical and human resources into a Green New Deal.”

The Green Party’s Green New Deal has been around for some time, and is specific in its proposals, unlike the Green New Deal being proposed by the left wing of the Democratic Party.

The U.S. Green Party is different from most Green parties in other countries. A few years ago it adopted the position that it is an anti-capitalist party, although somewhat vague on what it would replace capitalism with.

Hawkins is a revolutionary socialist. Specifically concerning the climate crisis, he calls for socializing under democratic control key productive sectors, notably energy production, power distribution, railroads, and a domestic manufacturing sector to be rebuilt on a green basis with clean power and zero waste.

To build a 100 percent clean energy system and eliminate greenhouse gases by 2030, he would create a cabinet-level Office of Climate Mobilization to coordinate all federal agencies to meet this goal.

He urged the next president to declare a Climate Emergency on the first day of taking office, and lists immediate steps the president could do under that national emergency to swiftly begin to combat the climate crisis.

Barry Sheppard

For his full climate program, go to: www.gp.org/hawkins_calls_for_climate_emergency.

Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager whose Friday student strikes sparked student climate strikes across the world, and which have inspired the September 20 climate strikes, is in the U.S. On September 13 she will join the Friday student strike in front of the White House, and then join the September 20 action a week later. She will also address the U.N. in New York on the climate crisis September 23.
