

# Red Alert on Global Warming - From California Fires to World Capitalism

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SAN FRANCISCO —The past year has seen an intensification of floods, wildfires, droughts, heatwaves and other results of global warming worldwide.

On August 6, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a report sounding the alarm.

An article in the *New York Times* began, “Nations have delayed curbing their fossil fuel emissions for so long that they can no longer stop global warming from intensifying over the next 30 years, though there is still a short window to prevent the most harrowing future, a major new United Nations scientific report has concluded.”

Here in California the acceleration of extreme weather this last year has been manifested by intensified heatwaves, drought and wildfires, part of such conditions growing in the Western states of the USA and reaching into Canada.

Drought in California has intensified for the past two decades during the late spring, summer and fall months, with wet months in late fall, winter and early spring.

The rainy season has gotten shorter and drier, interspersed with few years of greater rainfall.

The rainfall in the 2020-2021 wet season was especially sparse. As of early August the years of drought have resulted in exceptional conditions.

According to federal government agencies, 95 percent of California is in severe drought, extreme drought or exceptional drought.

Seven percent is in severe drought, with grazing land inadequate and the fire season is longer, with higher burn intensity. Trees are stressed; and wildlife diseases increase.

About 40 percent of California is in the more extreme drought category, in which the agencies say, “Livestock need expensive supplemental feed; cattle and horses are sold; little pasture remains; fruit trees bud early; producers begin irrigating in the winter.

“Fire season lasts year-round; fires occur in typically wet parts of the state; burn bans are implemented; water is inadequate for agriculture, wildlife and urban needs; reservoirs are extremely low; hydropower is restricted.”

Almost 50 percent is in the exceptional category, characterized by “Fields left fallow, orchards are removed, vegetable yields are low, and honey harvest is small. The number of wildfires and areas burned are extensive.

“Fish rescue and relocation begins; pine beetle infestation [of trees] occurs; forest mortality is high; wetlands dry up; survival of native plants and animals is low; fewer wildflowers bloom; wildlife death is widespread; algae blooms [in lakes] appear.”

Since early June, there have been extreme heatwaves in California and other Western states and Canada, with temperatures in many areas setting records well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, often above 40 degrees Celsius.

Harsh droughts and heatwaves spawn more numerous and dangerous wildfires, and there will be more in the months ahead.

An example of the acceleration of worldwide extreme weather is that six of the largest seven fires in California have occurred in the one year since August 2020.

Seventeen of the 20 largest fires have occurred since 2000.

## **The IPCC Report**

The acceleration of extreme weather we have seen this past year “is only the beginning, according to the report ...” says the article in the New York Times. “Even if nations started sharply cutting emissions today, total global warming is likely to be around 1.5 degrees Celsius [above pre-industrial levels] within the next two decades, a hotter future that is now essentially locked in.

“At 1.5 degrees of warming, scientists have found, the dangers grow considerably. Nearly one billion people worldwide could swelter in more frequent life-threatening heat waves. Hundreds of millions more would struggle for water because of droughts.

“Some animal and plant species alive today will be gone. Coral reefs, which sustain fisheries for large swaths of the globe, will suffer more frequent die-offs.

“ ‘We can expect a significant jump in extreme weather over the next 20 or 30 years,’ said Piers Forster, a climate scientist at the University of Leeds and one of the hundreds of international experts who helped write the report. ‘Things are ultimately likely to get worse than they are today.’

“All is not lost, however, and humanity can still prevent the planet from getting even hotter. Doing so would require a coordinated effort to stop adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere by around 2050, which would entail a rapid shift away from fossil fuels starting immediately, as well as potentially removing vast amounts of carbon from the air.

“If that happened, global warming would probably level off at around 1.5 degrees Celsius, the report concludes.

“But if nations fail in that effort, global average temperatures will keep rising — potentially passing 2 degrees, 3 degrees or even 4 degrees .... The report describes how every additional degree of warming brings far greater perils, such as ever more vicious floods and heat waves, worsening droughts and accelerating sea level rise that could threaten the existence of some island nations.

“The hotter the planet gets, the greater the risks of crossing dangerous ‘tipping points,’ like the

irreversible collapse of the immense ice sheets in Greenland and West Antarctica.”

The IPCC report laid all the blame for global warming on human influence.

It also reported that “In 2019, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations were higher than at any time at least 2 million years.”

And it continues to grow every year.

What are the chances that any movement toward “a rapid shift away from fossil fuels starting immediately” will occur?

Zero.

The UN Secretary- General Guterres called the report “code red for humanity.”

No nations except the immediately threatened ones, are even explaining to their populations this “code red” emergency, let alone doing anything about it. The vast majority of humanity knows nothing about this report.

A case in point is the United States. While some will have read the *New York Times* article, the whole U.S. government, from the federal level on down, is silent about the report, let alone mobilizing the population for the huge necessary work to immediately rapidly move away from burning fossil fuels.

During his campaign for the presidency, Biden said he would do something about climate change. But since has taken office, he is going in the opposite direction. He has approved new pipelines to import crude oil from the Canadian tar sands. This source of crude emits three times as much greenhouse gases in its extraction than other sources of crude, and of course emits more as it is refined and burned.

Native Americans and their supporters are the ones most aware of the dangers of these pipelines and the oil they transport, that threaten their reservations. The demonstrations at Standing Rock were the most well-known.

Biden is now urging the OPEC countries to increase their output of oil, to bring down gasoline prices to bolster his image.

Since taking office, his administration has approved of over 2,000 new permits for further drilling and fracking on federal lands.

Biden does say that he has a goal of getting to net zero emissions by 2050, while doing nothing to even start on reaching that goal. The effect of his vague promise about 2050 on the population is to assume that there is all the time in the world to even think about it, like him.

In 2015 there was a UN-sponsored meeting on climate change, which adopted the “Paris Accords”. Trump pulled the U.S. out of those accords, and Biden has rejoined them, but like all such accords going back to Kyoto, the U.S. has worked, under all presidents including Obama in 2015, to make sure they are toothless without any firm agreements on binding action.

The “advanced” capitalist countries, which are most responsible historically for the burning of fossil fuels and the current crisis, have a responsibility to the poorer nations to help them reduce emissions.

One of the most threatened countries is Bangladesh, already experiencing extreme heat waves and flooding due to global warming. Speaking on Democracy Now, Bangladeshi climate scientist Saleemul Huq said, "It's time for the rich countries to do what they agreed to in Paris: keep the global temperature below 1.5 degrees and provide \$100 billion a year to developing countries to tackle climate change. They promised but didn't deliver."

Another such conference is scheduled for next November. Given the rich nations' ignoring the IPCC report, it would be foolish to get our hopes up.

## **World Capitalism, Left to It's Own Devices, Cannot Stop the Coming Catastrophe**

Capitalism now dominates the world, including in the countries of the former USSR, East Europe, and China.

But although this system dominates everywhere (except Cuba), the world remains divided into nation-states with their own capitalist ruling classes and competing interests.

International capitalist "competition" is extolled as the positive driving force for the good of humanity, the direct opposite of the international coordination and cooperation needed to avoid the the horrific future for humanity and many other forms of life that rapidly growing global warming means.

Further, the some 195 countries in the world are far from equal. The world is divided into a handful of imperialist countries one the one side, and the majority of capitalist countries exploited and dominated by these imperialist countries on the other.

Imperialism in the "advanced" countries experienced rapid outward expansion in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently as a result of the growth of monopolies in those countries concentrated wealth that could not be profitably invested "at home".

This led to increased competition among the imperialist countries themselves to corner plunder in the exploited countries. This increased to such an extent that it led to the first world war between those countries in Europe, which the U.S. joined in the final stages of the war.

After an interim period of about two decades, the intensified inter-imperialist conflict led to the even more devastating second world war, now joined by Japan.

While the U.S. emerged from the Second World War as the dominate power militarily and economically over world capitalism, imposing a "Pax Americana" that has prevented a new inter-imperialist world war (so far), economic competition among the imperialist powers has re-emerged in the past half a century.

None of the imperialist powers want to be the first to rapidly eliminate fossil fuels, since the others would have an economic advantage of continuing to burn them, even if a little less.

Most of the imperialist powers have been historically the main source of fossil fuel burning since the industrial revolution that has loaded the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases responsible for global warming.

They also exploit the rest of the world. Marxist economists point to the fact that even though today

most of the production of surplus value occurs in the “global south” due to outsourcing, most is expropriated by the imperialist “north” by control over technology (patents and other mechanisms), and unequal trade because of greater labor productivity, etc.

Even though they have the moral responsibility to pour enough money and other resources into the “third world” to help them fight the effects of global warming and reduce their own emissions without paying a severe economic price, that is not how imperialist exploitation works.

Money and resources flow in the opposite direction, and the imperialists are not about to change that. Also, again, none want to be the first.

Moreover, the ruling classes of all countries dependent on fossil fuels have large fixed capital investments in them, which they are loath to lose.

It ain't easy to take on Big Oil or Big Coal, and now natural gas companies.

So we should not be surprised that they have done virtually nothing to date to stop increasing greenhouse gasses, let alone reduce them.

### **What Can Be Done?**

Certainly we cannot trust world capitalism left on its own to do what is necessary.

We know that increasingly severe whether is in store worldwide for the next decades. We will have to count on more and more people becoming aware of the crisis. What the capitalists think is not the issue, because the problem is not their consciousness, but their system and its inherent logic.

As more people who do not have a class interest in capitalism, workers and other oppressed classes including the peasantry, increasingly become aware of the crisis, they will be open to becoming organized to fight it, if people today, no matter how small in number, begin this work.

Organizing ecosocialists can be the start. What will have to be done is convincing those becoming more and more affected by global warming, that they have to take anti-capitalist measures like fighting the fossil fuel industry.

Workers in fossil fuel industries today will have to be convinced through concrete proposals that cutting back on fossil fuels will be accompanied by opening new clean energy industries on a scale far larger than any proposed today.

Transportation and much more will have to be revolutionized. In fact, to transform the economy in the necessary direction will take vast planning that will encroach deeply on capitalist interests.

Another task will be opposing capitalist politicians and parties that stand in the way.

Much more can be said, and more will be understood as this fight develops, and new tasks emerge.

If such a movement based on the working classes became powerful enough, it could force capitalist ruling classes to begin to take partial steps against global warming.

The process will be uneven country by country, and there will be success and failures.

Utopian?

The alternative, to rely on the capitalists and their system to eliminate the coming catastrophe left to their own devices, is what is truly a utopian pipe dream.

**Barry Sheppard**

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