“Get it Done! [1] The Global Climate Justice Movement’s Struggle to Achieve a Radical Climate Treaty”

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“Rarer by far than originality in science or art is originality in political action. And rarer still is original political action that enlarges, rather than blights or destroys, human possibility.”

– Jonathan Schell

Introduction: An Earth in Crisis

The science is in: climate change is here now, not in the future [2], and it’s already having devastating effects on people’s lives. [3] That’s the bad news.

The good news is the rise of a global climate justice movement which is growing in numbers, reach, strength, and inventiveness. It is impossible to encompass easily, because it consists of thousands of organizations at every level – community, city, region, nation, and global – interlinked in a network of networks. But it is there, and this essay will examine some of what it has accomplished so far, where the major point of impact lies at the moment, and what strategic decisions must be faced moving forward toward Paris in December 2015, when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] convenes the COP 21 meetings [the Conference of the Parties, in this case the twenty-first annual U.N. climate summit)] to finalize the global climate treaty it has been working on for several years, a treaty which may represent the last best chance to contain the disruptive climate change that is coming our way and to preserve some dignity for individuals and societies.
Humanity’s future, then, looks increasingly set to be a race between the effects of climate change and its corporate and nation-state drivers, on the one hand, and the efforts and ability of this movement to check those effects, bring to a halt the rate of increase of the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming, and then rapidly reverse the trend downward by defeating the one percent at the ballot box, in the streets, at places of work and consumption, and in the culture and media in which we swim.

I’m going to start with two observations, which are not self-evident and which may challenge some readers’ assumptions and understandings:

- the climate crisis is far more profound and daunting than most of us realize
- the planet can’t stay below the bottom-line warming target of 2 degrees Celsius under capitalism as we know it

Let’s take a brief look at each of these claims.

*The climate crisis is far more profound and daunting than most of us realize*

In his powerful essay, “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math,” Bill McKibben argues that the world’s largest fossil-fuel producing corporations and countries must be compelled to leave 80 percent of their proven reserves (and thus their actual value) in the ground. This is the inescapable physical logic of salvaging a livable planet for future generations. [4]

I find this a compelling argument: that to have a reasonable chance (which as McKibben points out: “‘Reasonable’,” in this case, means four chances in five, or somewhat worse odds than playing Russian roulette with a six-shooter) to stay under a 2° Celsius temperature rise in this century, we can only burn a given amount of fossil fuels. In 2012, at the time of writing, McKibben put this atmospheric cap at 565 gigatons of CO₂, roughly a 15-year supply – till about
2027 – if “business as usual” trends of economic production and growth continue. The terrifying part of course is the estimate that the world’s already “proven” reserves exceed the cap by five times, and this figure is edging upward even as the remaining atmospheric space for greenhouse gases inexorably dwindles.

Radical climate scientists Kevin Anderson and Alice Bowes of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in Manchester, England, are doing what more scientists need to do: like McKibben, they are not only analyzing the climate problem, they are using their knowledge to identify the political problem that lies beneath it. [5] This vision was signalled in the subtitle to their well-attended side event at the recent COP 19 UN climate summit in Warsaw, Poland in November 2013: “Global Carbon Budget 2013: rising emissions and a radical plan for 2 degrees.” [6] There was a sobering presentation of the numbers, only slightly different from McKibben’s: we have an atmospheric carbon budget remaining of about 1,000 gigatons of CO$_2$ for a 66 percent chance of staying under two degrees. So under their assumptions, we have 20 years left of business as usual before we exceed the limit (but now put two bullets in the gun with we are using to play Russian Roulette with the planet).

Then they got down to the policy implications of our predicament (and this is what makes these two scientists heroes):

- Avoid 4 degrees at all cost (this much even the World Bank now agrees with) [7]
- The global North needs to cut 70 percent of its emissions over the next decade
- Only the richest several percent of the world population need do radical mitigation
- Market solutions won’t achieve any of this

As they noted, “we’re not short of capital, just the initiative and courage.” Even more stunning are the political implications that Anderson drew just before COP 19: “Today, after two decades of bluff and lies, the remaining 2°C budget demands revolutionary change to the political and economic hegemony.” [8] In another interview during COP 19 Anderson said: “I’m really
stunned there is no sense of urgency here,” pointing out that what’s needed is leadership, courage, innovative thinking, engaged people, and difficult choices. [9]

The question the global climate justice movement confronts is: What are the corresponding social and political implications of this argument? How do we achieve this feat, with the might of the world’s largest corporations and richest governments united in suicidal lockstep against us?

*The planet can’t stay below 2 degrees Celsius under capitalism as we know it*

This claim is the result of a long chain of reasoning, historical, theoretical, and empirical – in a word, sociological. The sociology of climate change [10] looks something like this:

Because it is based on literally endless growth, which requires ever-rising demands on the planet’s finite natural resources, capitalism will become unviable as resources are increasingly depleted, overworked, or made scarce by the impacts of climate change. At bottom, the problem for the medium-term (50 years?) future of capitalism is that its material basis will no longer be dependable. While some excellent advocates of sustainable development, notably Tim Jackson [11], have made the case for an ecologically-guided “degrowth” economy as a solution to this contradiction, they have not made a convincing case that this could be delivered under the political economy of capitalism as we know it or as it could conceivably be reformed even with all the political will in the world (currently conspicuous by its absence) in the necessary time frame out to about 2050, by which point climate science tells us the vast majority of emissions must have ended.

No one has put this more eloquently lately than Renfrey Clarke, in a piece aptly titled “Climate change is evidence of the death-wish of capitalism:”

What is it about capitalism that the system wilfully pursues strategies that look certain to bring about its own demise?
The answer lies in the fact that while an unaddressed climate crisis will be lethal to capitalism, the solutions to the crisis also promise to bring the system down — and sooner. The capitalists’ dilemma becomes clearer if we list some of the key measures required:

– At least two-thirds of proven fossil fuel reserves need to be left in the ground. That is billions of dollars effectively written off.

– Material and financial resources need to be reoriented, in a concerted way, from the pursuit of maximum profit toward achieving rapid declines in greenhouse gas emissions.

– This reorientation of the economy will need to include a large element of direct state spending, structured around long-term planning and backed by tightening regulation. Schemes such as carbon pricing cannot play more than a limited, subsidiary role.

– To keep mass living standards at the highest levels consistent with these measures, and ensure popular support, the main costs of the reorientation need to be levied on the wealthy.

Can anyone imagine the world’s capitalist elites agreeing to such measures, except perhaps under the most extreme popular pressure? [12]

Clarke closes by quoting Noam Chomsky: “In the moral calculus of capitalism, greater profits in the next quarter outweigh the fate of your grandchildren.”

*The Present Moment*

One way to think of the present moment is as a triple crisis: economic crisis, democratic deficit, militarism and endemic violence – now bound together and exacerbated by the wild card of climate chaos. This would seem to auger a perfect storm of crisis. Ultimately the massive social, economic, and political inequalities already generated by neoliberal capitalism and captured in Occupy’s meme that “We are the 99 percent!” arrayed against “the one percent” (more like one one-hundredth of a percent) of the political and economic elites and their class power would seem to set the social world as well as the natural world on a collision course which the elites cannot win even on their own terms without destroying the basis for all human life.
To put it bluntly, we’re in a mess, time is very short, and the forces arrayed against us are strong, very strong. And this when our movement is growing, but still far too weak to win, at least for the moment.

The Global Climate Justice Movement

This leads to one possible hypothesis for next steps (there are surely many others): only a strong and vigorous climate justice movement on a global scale has the capacity to force governments to stand up to the economic and political forces of carbon capitalism to agree to the treaty needed to keep the planet under the dangerous threshold of 2° Celsius.

Let’s consider the historical arc of this movement so far. One dividing line straddles the end of 2009, between pre- and post-Copenhagen. The global climate justice movement arose out of previous movements at the COP 13 meeting in Bali in 2007, when the radical network Climate Justice Now! formed up, and attracted to it by the time of COP15 in 2009 some formidable forces, including Via Campesina, the UK climate camps, Jubilee South and the intellectuals around Third World Network and Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth International under the leadership of Nnimmo Bassey, the Durban movements for radical climate justice and Patrick Bond, and a network of intellectuals and activists from all over the world, among them Michael Dorsey, Janet Redman, Lidy Nacpil, Tadzio Mueller, Ivonne Yanez, Pablo Solon, Anne Petersmann, Martin Khor, Kandi Mosset, Walden Bello, and just outside it perhaps, the indispensable Bill McKibben and a rising 350.org. They had support inside the negotiation halls, provided by Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives and much of the 40-plus member strong Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Bolivian president Evo Morales and Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance) left-of-center countries of Latin America’s Pink Tide, and a less radical but important part of the Global North, most notably the European
Union, led by Gordon Brown in the UK, Germany, and some of the Scandinavian governments. Copenhagen was the high water mark of this first period, and the managed outcome of the debacle that led to the Copenhagen Accord signaled the protracted stalemate that the COP has been playing out ever since, aptly characterized by the subtitle of a book by Patrick Bond published when COP 18 came to his home town of Durban in 2011: “Paralysis Above.” [13]

But the second part the subtitle of Bond’s book was “Movement Below.” The global climate justice movement regrouped in Cochabamba, Bolivia in April 2009 to deliver a magnificent manifesto, “The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth.” The movement met up at COP 16 in Cancún and COP 17 in Durban and tried to push against the process on the inside. But with the economic collapse of neoliberal capitalist globalization in the protracted Great Recession, the balance of forces was shifting decisively away from the positions of AOSIS and ALBA, while the EU aligned itself more and more with the rest of the global North. Alongside this, many activists, from Bond himself to McKibben and many organizations from 350.org to FOEI were withdrawing energy from what they saw as a hopelessly compromised process in the COPs, and putting it instead into local and national-level campaigns and building networked global coalitions. Meanwhile, the power of the corporations, so evident at the November 2013 COP 19 in Warsaw, has become that much greater, and the stubborn conflict between the interests of the global North and global South as intractable as ever in an irreconcilable stalemate that makes the chances of finding pathways to a less than 2° world look vanishingly small.

Out of the ashes of post-Copenhagen disillusionment, global economic recession, and movement withdrawal and depression came a new force to be reckoned with, however, a new front inside and around the COP, namely the global youth climate justice movement, which has
been blossoming from one COP to the next. This movement is also active in many local campaigns, leading the fossil free divestment campaigns in the U.S. and the UK, playing an important role alongside a revitalized Canadian indigenous movement in the form of *Idle No More* in the epic battle against the Keystone Pipeline in Canada and the U.S., and energizing the anti-fracking movement in California and elsewhere. They have brought to the movement a new generation influenced by the moment of Occupy and other horizontalist movements and some new and not-so-new ways of organizing that have real promise: *PowerShifts*, social media of all kinds, and vast reserves of imagination, energy, openness, and hope. In a word, they are re-imagining climate justice. [14]

Thinking Forward

It seems that we will need to assemble the greatest social movement the world has ever seen to achieve this. Without such a movement, we are literally cooked. The global climate justice movement knows this, especially its youthful component. This is their agenda. It should also be the agenda of every scholar-activist and concerned citizen on the planet. The movement(s) for climate justice around the world need all hands on deck.

2014 must be the year that we all scale up our efforts toward the end of mounting irresistible pressure of all kinds on our governments and on the corporations, banks, and all the institutions of neoliberal capitalism that they serve, *forcing them* to take the decisive steps toward the treaty we all need and want.

Let’s close with a few observations that at least point out some of the efforts under way to radically reduce emissions. Staying just on the level of events and mobilizations, we may note a number of new developments.
There is the intriguing Venezuelan proposal to hold several “Social Pre-COP” gatherings this year focused on youth, indigenous peoples, and various movement capacity building gatherings. As Claudia Salerno, Venezuela’s lead negotiator put it in announcing this at the 2013 Warsaw COP 19, “A situation of madness requires a little craziness,” adding, “We are not afraid to fail…. [There is] nothing to lose, and maybe a lot to gain.” This is a bold initiative, and a risk no doubt worth running as long as the post-Chávez Venezuelan government, revolutionary as its legacy may be, does not impose itself onto the process [15] or the events are derailed by the elite opposition’s street protests against the Maduro government. [16] The latest information announces two pre-COP events, now set for July 15-18 and November 4-7 in Caracas.

Another major new initiative is the Global Climate Convergence (http://globalclimateconvergence.org/), which proclaims “People, Planet, Peace over Profits” and is seeking to build “collaboration across national borders and fronts of struggle to harness the transformative power we already possess as a thousand separate movements springing up across the planet.” The basic idea is to create a lasting collaboration between climate activism and other forms of social justice, including progressive labor, indigenous organizing, and the fledgling ecosocialist movement in the United States, and ultimately, no doubt, beyond. Convened by Jill Stein, 2012 presidential candidate of the Green Party of the United States, this call resonates with the formation of the new U.S. ecosocialist organization System Change Not Climate Change (http://systemchangenotclimatechange.org/), which aims at shifting the momentum of the climate justice movement in an anti-capitalist direction by starting “a far-ranging discussion within society: can stopping climate change be compatible with an economic system that is flooded with fossil fuel profits? Can we create a safe and healthy planet for all
human beings while simultaneously allowing ever-expanding resource extraction, endless growth, and the massive inequalities that come along with it?”

UN Secretary-General Ban ki-Moon has convened a special Climate Summit 2014: Catalyzing Action, to take place in New York in September 2014 with the charge: “This Summit is meant to be a solutions summit, not a negotiating session. I have invited all Heads of State and Government, along with leaders from business and finance, local government and civil society. I am asking all who come to bring bold and new announcements and action. I am asking them to bring their big ideas.” [17]

The Secretary-General’s bold invitation is of course welcome, but his telling placement of business and finance ahead of civil society and local leaders suggests that the hoped-for breakthrough into progress on the treaty is rather unlikely. The summit might be better titled “Climate Depression 2014: Paralyzing Action.” On a more promising note, there is ongoing planning in radical U.S. climate justice circles for a “People’s Summit” to take place in New York at the same time, where rather than a conventional protest and demonstration against the UNFCCC governments’ lack of seriousness on the issues, the movement will craft and offer “bold and new announcements and action” and “big ideas” of its own. An important agenda item for this gathering might be the development of a people’s plan for radical emissions reductions.

Just as Ban hopes to kickstart a UN process that is driven by stalemate from above, the global climate justice movement will build fresh momentum from below as it strives to find the ways to bring into full flowering the biggest social movement the world has ever seen.

These two forces will meet again at COP 20 in Lima in November, and their unequal struggle over a treaty that may well shape the fate of the planet will resume. As the activists who
walked out of COP 19 in Warsaw said to the world about their intentions for Lima:

¡Volveremos!/We will Return!

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1 This was the conclusion to a fiery speech by young climate activist Anjali Appadurai at the conclusion of the Durban COP 17 climate summit in 2011: “2020 is too late to wait! We need an urgent path to a fair, ambitious, and legally binding treaty! You must take responsibility to act now, or you will threaten the lives of the youth and the world’s most vulnerable. You must set aside partisan politics and let science dictate decisions. You must pledge ambitious targets to lower emissions, not expectations. 2020 is too late to wait!” With these words she brought down the house and compelled the session chair to confess: “On a purely personal note, I wonder why we let not speak half of the world’s population first in this conference, but only last”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko3e6G_7GY4


6 This account is from my field notes; on what the Warsaw COP means for the global climate justice movement see John Foran, “¡Volveremos!/We Will Return’: The State of Play for the Global Climate Justice Movement at the 2013 Warsaw UN Climate Summit COP 19,” forthcoming in Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements.


Renfrey Clarke, “Climate change is evidence of the death-wish of capitalism” (April 26, 2014), [https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/56313](https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/56313)


“Re-Imagining Climate Justice” is the name given to a gathering of the movement in Santa Barbara, California, in May 2014 in which I played a role: [www.climatejusticeproject.com](http://www.climatejusticeproject.com)

Maria Escalante and Adrian Fernandez Jauregui, “The Pre-COP: A Chance We Must Take” (December 29, 2013), [http://www.earthinbrackets.org/2013/12/29/the-pre-cop-a-chance-we-must-take/](http://www.earthinbrackets.org/2013/12/29/the-pre-cop-a-chance-we-must-take/)
