

## System Change not Climate Change: Has a New Social Formation Emerged at the Kyoto II Climate Change Talks in Copenhagen?\*

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There is so much excitement in Copenhagen! From December 7-18, 2009 two huge global gatherings, one official, the other unofficial, struggled to arrive at a binding agreement to stop climate chaos by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. All day on Friday the 18th there was expectation of an official conclusion and an agreement—if only a vapid political agreement. And this would be a vapid political agreement born in the offices of the Danish government and rejected by sticklers of protocol, who were insisting that the United Nations' rules of consensus be followed.

The Latin Americans successfully held out in the final hours of the climate talks in Copenhagen, defending the United Nations' democratic process that requires consensus and participation. The COP 15 (the fifteenth Conference of the parties to the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, or UNCCC) ended with no official accord, agreement, or Kyoto II document. It ended with a very sharp division of the world's governments between the green capitalists on the one hand (business as usual as Earth careens further into tipping points and meltdowns) and, on the other, ecosocialists of many stripes and organizations all strongly committed to assisting in the emergence of a new global political economy that reverses ecocidal accumulation without end.

The so-called “Copenhagen Accord” is not a United Nations agreement. It is merely the wish list of the U.S., E.U., and their allies. These brokers for big capital want first to jump-start fake green business activities largely in the countries of the South and second, more importantly, to create a global hedge fund-type casino capitalist gambling infrastructure for betting on carbon trade prices (the new Big Bubble). The non-official status of the U.S.-engineered Accord was recognized by the UN's December 18, 2009 “Decision -/CP.15.” This Decision is a fifteen-word model of brevity: “The Conference of the Parties, Takes note of the Copenhagen Accord of December 18, 2009.”

Let us back up a minute. On December 14, 2009 with five days of talks to go, the Danish government tried to insert its own political statement into the negotiation process. This usurpating text is not the formal, official proposed text of a legally binding new emissions control agreement to take effect from 2013, a text drafted painstakingly over the last fourteen conferences of the government parties. The Danish government was initially roundly foiled in this attempt, with most parties crying foul.

When the first try at fiddling the UN system surfaced, Nnimmo Bassey of Nigeria's Environmental Rights Action and head of Friends of the Earth International galvanized the Nigerian government representatives to say no. Then the African Union walked out. This

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\* This piece is an updated version of a blog post from the Copenhagen climate talks for the journal *Canadian Dimension*: <http://canadiandimension.com/blog/>.

walk out, supported by the ALBA (the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas),<sup>1</sup> was ended only when the UNCCC secretariat ruled that yes, Africa was right. The UN rules do require that a specific, agreed, and democratic process (one country, one vote, but with consensus required) be followed.

The Danes then tried again on Friday the 18th about midday. With the big hitters like Obama and Clinton then at the official talks, the pressure was on all delegates for an agreement of some sort to at least save face. In the late hours of the last day of the official talks, the Danish empty political statement was reluctantly accepted by the African Union, to the disappointment of many.

When the second try surfaced, Bassey and almost all NGO representatives had been barred from the official talks. Without their advice, support, and watchful eye on accountability, the government representatives were left with no groundings. This meant an open field for deal makers. The “no” from Nigeria morphed over the last two days of the talks into a querulous and embarrassed “yes.”

However, Sudan held out. The Sudanese representative made himself very unpopular with the European delegates who heaped scorn on him when he explained his country’s refusal to support the empty document on the grounds that it would impose a sentence of genocide on the peoples of both Africa and the world. As European diplomats remonstrated with him for the use of the word genocide, he stuck to his guns. He was then violently denounced as an extremist in the formal sessions. Darfur, Sudan’s genocide, focused the mind on International Criminal Court proceedings against genocide perpetrators, and conference delegates were horrified and angered that their actions were being compared to such wanton cruelty. The intensity of the outrage was rooted, too, in the longstanding divisions within the UN over identifying pre-1994 apartheid South Africa and zionist Israel as racist regimes deserving of boycott and sanction.

Then China, Brazil, the European Union, the U.S.A. and its lapdog Canada backed the Danish verbiage. The only holdout was ALBA. Their objection was that the draft from the Danish government was empty, and as Sudan’s representative declared, to support it was to be complicit in ecocide.

The big star in this ALBA holdout was Angelica Navarro, the 30-something Bolivian delegation chief. Most impressively, she withstood the grinding exhaustion and continued with sterling logic, numbers, and morality to resist the pressure from almost all corners of the world to affirm the ALBA refusal. She spearheaded a remarkable Bolivian and ALBA stance that consensus must be followed. She also led the fight for the recognition of the rights of nature at the climate talks. These are enshrined in the Bolivian constitution, and if Navarro had her way, nature’s rights would be inscribed in international law with prosecution and sanctioning arrangements.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*, or ALBA, is an organization intended to socially, politically, and economically integrate nations of Latin America and the Caribbean. Started by Cuba and Venezuela in 2004, ALBA now has nine member countries including Bolivia, Nicaragua, The Dominican Republic, Honduras, Ecuador, Antigua, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The last 48 hours have not been without humor inside the grim premises of the official talks. At 6am on Saturday (December 19th), the African delegates began to plead that their flight arrangements required a deal now, that their planes were departing by 8am and the like. Several absolutely exhausted journalists in the early hours of Saturday began to file stories claiming that ALBA had caved and the climate talks resulted in the ratification of an empty political statement. Since ALBA never did cave, these reports were revealed as inaccurate.

Obama left the official talks at about 9:30pm on Friday amidst great security displays of sirens and a massive vehicle convoy. It seemed that the least pretext might trigger repression from the edgy, jumpy security guards, police, military, plain clothes cops, and the like. They are everywhere trying to prove their importance and the legitimacy of their technical toys of violence that hang from their armored bodies. No one has anything good to say about Obama here in Copenhagen. South Africa's bishop Desmond Tutu summed up the sentiment succinctly: "Obama has been given the Nobel prize for peace. He is a Nobel laureate. Let him become what he is."

On Friday, December 17<sup>th</sup> at the people's assembly in the Klimaforum, a panel of speakers roundly condemned the vacuous speech given by Obama as having no insight, no perspective, and nothing to offer the world as we burn. Of all the leaders of industrialized countries, Canada's Stephen Harper is the most embarrassing, as Naomi Klein indicated in her excellent critique of the official talks on Friday afternoon at the Klimaforum. In fact, Obama's simpleminded rhetoric has provided a strong incentive for representatives of peripheral countries like Bolivia and Sudan to fill the leadership gap.

Of great importance in any appreciation of the deadlock inside the official talks at Bella Center is the issue of money. Some "\$30 billion for the first three years (2010-2012) and then \$100 billion per year up to 2020" have been committed by the U.S.A. and other countries. Most of this is targeted for the global South for climate change "mitigation" on terms similar to those required by the World Bank. This means more structural adjustment and more neoliberal enclosures for private profit. There is palpable outrage at this neo-imperial effort to extend corporate rule in the face of dramatic market failure and the collapse of capitalist relations all around.

But according to the rules set by the U.S. and its minion nations, no money can be disbursed unless there is some kind of political statement agreed and issued. One can imagine the concern of the many thousands of corporate lobbyists and hacks keen to profit from this largess. These front men (and women) for fake environmental NGOs that in reality are business associations for the capitalists see the money hanging in front of their eyes. But they can't put their hands on it, all because of ALBA. Their potential partners, the deal makers of the Third World governments, are also selectively salivating at the prospects of personal and political gain from accessing this money. The male dealers, both Third World and corporate, are on ice—without an agreement, there is no disbursement of money. A certain kind of panic is taking hold of those parties who are duty bound to bring home the bacon (apologies to vegetarians all). One corporate hack told me that supporters of the U.S. accord wanted to publish the names of governments in favor and opposed to ensure that only supporters got "mitigation" money.

At Klimaforum in the evening of December 18<sup>th</sup>, a very different and jubilant atmosphere reigned. The Danish civil society organizations had mounted a terrific peoples' assembly. This was a first. Never before had the climate change talks been paralleled by a popular congress. Thousands participated, the global South in the lead. Each participant seemed to represent thousands at home. Fractious initiatives were eclipsed by a heady universalism that announced a new global consciousness. This unity in the face of universal ecocide was the unity of action. The popular forum generated its own climate change declaration (see elsewhere in this issue for the text). It was issued in the "can-do" spirit of the world's people fed up with do-nothing politricks while climate catastrophes strike.

There are two more key features of the peoples' achievement. First, the focus is on action against the climate chaos perpetrators, the big profiteers and Big Oil. Second, there is astounding unanimity that solutions are in hand and they must be *systemic*, not piecemeal. This is where ecosocialism comes in. The hundreds of workshops and presentations gave pride of place to peoples' solutions as they are integrated into new life-centered social relations. I could see throughout that alliances were being built to reclaim power to reverse enclosures and to reassert the commons. In dramatic contrast, profiteers remain divided and fixated on the hopeless reductionism of counting molecules of carbon and trying to put a commodity price on them.

The Danish Klimaforum team and their allies decided at the last minute to retain, not dissolve, their peoples' assembly organizing committee. They expanded its membership to reflect global commoners all. Having learned from the disastrous "no-politics" posture of the organizers of successive (Ford- and Rockefeller-funded) World Social Forums, this new coordination committee asserted that its writ was preeminently political: to implement the popular declaration as it evolves. The committee then handed over the torch (a big bundle of files and papers, in fact) to the Latin American friends in attendance who will prepare for late November 2010 when a follow up climate conference will be held at a venue in Mexico.

As the events here in Copenhagen come to an end, very much in my mind is the superb contribution of women, indigenous, and Third World peoples to these climate talks. The greatest victories cluster around the demand to shut down the tar sands, and more widely, to stop all fossil fuel production. "Keep the oil under the soil, keep the coal in the hole, keep the tar sand under the land," as Oilwatch demands. This demand, obscure and on the margins since it was put forward by Ecuador civil society in Kyoto in 1997, is now the front line demand.

This escalation of the importance of stopping emissions at source is one of the most remarkable evolutions I have witnessed in many decades of political work on the international scene. Direct, coordinated, global action against the major polluters both at the point of production and at the point of consumption was advocated by George Monbiot and Naomi Klein, amongst a host of others here in Copenhagen. This "Shut Down Big Oil" policy is in fact the policy of many environmental NGOs, social movements, and increasingly, of governments. This leap forward was dramatized in September 2009 when the new and immensely important Climate Camps in the U.K. and Canada mounted at least four tightly coordinated direct and global actions against the companies profiting from exploitation of filthy oil from Canada's tar sands. The new social form in robust evidence in

Copenhagen's Klimaforum is the popular commons, or what can be called ecosocialism, prefigured. The new social vehicle that is nurturing this transformation (and fossil-to-solar energy transition) is the Climate Camp. Evoking the teach-ins and love-ins of the 1960s, the Klimaforum was a kind of giant Climate Camp, launching direct actions to free political prisoners and challenge climate criminals. We are going to see the phenomena of climate camps explode in the coming months.

Forward to Mexico and the enforcement of a peoples' climate agreement that effectively punishes the perpetrators and brings them down in order to cool the world transformed. System change not climate change!