

## ***REALITY CHECK***

### **The Bankruptcy of Capitalist Solutions to the Climate Crisis**

*Christine Frank*

We live on a planet in peril, one that is in jeopardy because of capitalist greed. The combustion of fossil fuels to power commodity production is causing Earth to meltdown. Yet no measurable progress is being made to cope with the situation, since greenhouse gas emissions continue to spew forth with no end in sight, CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations have spiked every year this century, and temperatures are still rising. We are on the verge of complete climate chaos as a cascade of positive feedbacks pushes us ever closer to dangerous tipping points, while putting all of nature horribly out of balance. Still, the capitalist class continues to resist with all its might the implementation of viable solutions that will allow us to adapt to the dramatic changes that are occurring.

The reason for this is the almighty profit motive that drives them to extract ever more raw materials to produce ever more goods, many of which have little to do with the satisfaction of genuine human need. This frantic production of things they've convinced us we all desperately need is for what is *now* a seriously oversaturated and *failing* market. Let's face it, capitalism has had 250 years to prove that it can produce the necessities of life without harming the natural world and humanity, and it has failed the test miserably.

In regard to the climate crisis, the primary strategy of the capitalist ruling class is to basically ignore it and engage in desperate attempts to wrest the remaining hydrocarbons from the bowels of the Earth. The capitalists relentlessly chase the last barrel of oil by waging bloody resource wars under the pretext of fighting terrorism, lifting the moratorium on offshore drilling, auctioning oil and gas leases, continually threatening to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to exploitation, engaging in destructive tar-sands and oil-shale extraction, and using carbon dioxide, ironically, to coax recovery from depleted oil reservoirs and coalbed methane fields. To get at what is left of our coal reserves, they must go deeper and deeper with deadly retreat mining or blasting the tops clean off of mountains and stripping away the land, leaving devastated ecosystems and human lives. To offer the illusion that they are actually doing something to mitigate climate change, they offer an array of *non*-solutions that only do further harm either directly or indirectly, because they serve as stalling tactics that suck us deeper into the mire of environmental devastation and climate catastrophe. As a class, the capitalists' sense of self-preservation is as strong as ever. As individual human beings living on a planet in peril, they seem to have no basic survival instincts whatsoever as they continue to pursue policies that are racing us—themselves included—toward certain annihilation.

#### **Carbon Trading Schemes**

Those responsible for the climate crisis—the Carbon Barons and others of their ilk—refuse to deal with it in any substantive way. At first, their strategy was to deny global warming is occurring, then to say it is not caused by human activity and to employ a host of skeptics whose job it is to cast doubt on the evidence. Now that the science is unassailable and the debate is over, they endlessly

stall and do essentially nothing. So that business can proceed as usual, the best the captains of industry and their subservient politicians can come up with is a plethora of tactics that will avoid meaningful change and allow them to fuel the economy in the manner to which it has been accustomed. They have proposed carbon trading and auction schemes that are nothing but licenses to pollute, to be bought and sold on an exchange, with brokers receiving a tidy commission in the bargain. Incredible as it may seem, European governments have so massively overallocated CO<sub>2</sub> permits as to cause the carbon market to crash because of falling prices. To the extent that carbon trading accomplishes anything, it results in the commodification of Earth's carbon cycling system and is just one more attempt to privatize nature. Furthermore, it is nothing but a phony accounting scheme that will only give a free hand to the big corporate polluters to get away with murder. Cooking the books will *only* cook the planet!

Carbon trading has been the primary strategy of the European Union. As a consequence, every E.U. nation has been forced to admit in utter disgrace that they will not make their emission reduction goals for the first round of the Kyoto Protocol. With the worldwide financial crisis as an excuse, heads of government and environment ministers are all crying poverty and demanding that the caps be lowered so they can continue to backslide on goals they were not even close to meeting in the first place. This was the main thrust of the UN climate change conference held in Poznan Poland in December 2008. They cannot be allowed to use the financial crisis as a justification for their inaction. We must say, "Save the Climate, *not* Wall Street!"

To the extent that big-polluting Europe has reduced its greenhouse gas emissions at all, it has done so by shipping its manufacturing to the Southern Hemisphere where its multinationals are super-exploiting the labor and befouling the environment of poor countries while robbing European workers of decent-paying union jobs just as they do here in the United States. Given all that and the gross, raging maldevelopment of India and China, the Kyoto Protocol has been rendered a cruel joke. We must denounce "the win-win scenarios" of the Carbon Barons and the rest of the capitalist class. We cannot allow the bosses, who have gotten rich off of our backs to buy their way out of purgatory—a purgatory in which we now all languish and where many are dying by the millions amidst unspeakable suffering.

## **Carbon Offsets**

Another of their brilliant ideas is the sale of carbon offsets designed to ease the consciences of frequent flyers and overconsuming Hollywood celebrities. This pay-now, sin-later plan is reminiscent of the sale of indulgences by the medieval church. After greasing the palms of the corrupt hierarchy, sinners were allowed to go on transgressing while ensuring a reprieve in the Hereafter.

These contrivances also go under the ludicrous name of "carbon-credit logging" based on the notion that old-growth forests eventually max out on the amount of carbon they can store in their lifetimes. Studies have shown that this is not true, and ancient forests need to be protected.

The purchase of carbon offsets by planting trees—often genetically modified varieties in sterile monocultural plantations devoid of understory—is only making the problem worse by creating what the local people in the Southern Hemisphere call "Green Deserts." Natural forests, bogs, wetlands and grasslands, on which indigenous people must subsist, are foolishly being

destroyed for this purpose after they have conveniently been declared degraded land. The carbon traders have been cheating on calculations for the offsets, grossly overestimating the ability of the trees to absorb more carbon.

Any botanist will tell you that carbon fixation rates vary greatly within even the same species of plant depending upon the local microclimate, soils, hydrology, and other factors under which it is growing. Needless to say, a plantation in which trees are arranged uniformly in neat, straight rows and cleared of all other competing vegetation with the use of herbicides is not as richly biodiverse as a real forest and can never store as much carbon as the original ecosystem it replaced. There is a tremendous difference between monocrops and a tropical rainforest with its canopy, multiple layers of understory, and complex interactions among species all the way down to the microbial level. Monocultural tree plantations are ecologically unstable, being more vulnerable to disease and wildfire, which can release carbon instantly back into the atmosphere. Likewise, there is a huge difference between the impacts of carbon from fossil fuel combustion and biological carbon in trees as it is cycled from forest to ocean to atmosphere.

Once credit for the offsets has been sufficiently laundered through the system, the cheap, fast-growing eucalyptus and pine trees will be harvested, releasing their carbon and becoming net emitters. The whole process of land clearing releases stored carbon from the soil as well.

The result of offsets of this sort is to transform the developing world into a cheap carbon dump while the crisis worsens daily. They destroy the ability of local people to live, placing the burden for the richest nation's contribution to global warming onto the backs of the poorest with what is not only a *biological* monoculture but a *social* one as well. The destruction of the commons further marginalizes already marginalized peoples and robs them of their natural entitlements. It is completely at odds with the concept of climate justice and equity.

We must oppose these non-solutions, which advance globalization and neoliberal policies to benefit the transnationals and further their efforts to swallow up the resources of the planet. The foundation of carbon trading and offsets is dead wrong and a big lie. We must also stand against the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and G8 nations that promote these wretched schemes and stand in solidarity instead with those who are the victims of them.

## **Carbon Tax**

Seeing the uselessness of carbon trading and offsets, some, including NASA's chief climatologist James Hansen, are proposing a carbon tax to be implemented at the wellhead, mine gate, or port of entry. This would be the point at which the least amount of value has been added to the oil, gas or coal. Somewhere along the line, it would supposedly enable the reduction of payroll taxes, and everyone would receive a dividend, the size of which depends upon their fossil-fuel usage. The rationale is that working people, the poor, disadvantaged, and environmentally conscious would be rewarded for their frugality and wisdom by receiving a larger dividend, whereas the privileged and foolhardy would be punished for their prodigality by receiving virtually nothing so justice would prevail. Considering how the wealthy cheat on their taxes by wriggling through loopholes, once again, it will be working people who will pay the most. If the rich do bite the bullet and pay the tax, workers will suffer even further when the tax jacks up energy prices and subsequently the cost of everything else. Although we must all tread more gently on the planet and reduce our ecological footprint, working men and women should not be made to sacrifice and pay for our employers'

crimes against nature. By robbing us of our health, a clean environment, and our ability to support ourselves and our families, those crimes have been committed against us, too, as well as future generations. We've been paying long enough. "Tax Corporate Polluters, *Not* Consumers!" Haul the violators to prison and throw away the key!

## **The Myth of Clean Coal**

The myth of clean coal has been perpetuated by the coal industry and candidates for public office by promoting carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) techniques. Capture of CO<sub>2</sub> from coal-fired power plants will have an enormous energy penalty, requiring even more coal to be mined, transported, pulverized and burned. Sequestration will require a vast network of pipelines and pumping stations to store liquefied, supercritical, dense-phase carbon dioxide. There is no guarantee that the CO<sub>2</sub> will remain buried in the depleted oil and gas reservoirs or geological formations they propose using, since there are numerous migration pathways for slow leakage to occur that can contaminate ground and surface water. There is also the risk of catastrophic escapes of CO<sub>2</sub> that can asphyxiate vegetation at the roots, which require oxygen, and smother all life in the immediate vicinity at the surface.

Storing our greenhouse gas pollution in the ocean will have severe ecological consequences for marine life in terms of seawater acidification and hypoxia that will ultimately lead to death for any organism that cannot escape. Nor can we afford to further lower the pH of the seas. Ocean sequestration is only temporary, since the CO<sub>2</sub> will eventually outgas into the atmosphere.

In reality, out of the approximately 600 coal-fired power plants in the United States, there is not a single one that has CCS in operation. It is nothing but hype by the coal industry which has spent millions on ad campaigns talking up the oxymoronic concept of "clean coal." Coal is about as clean as a cigarette is healthy, and it should be left in the ground where Mother Nature put it, along with all the rest of the filthy fossil fuels.

## **Nuking the Climate**

They also expect us to swallow the buckets of greenwash coming from the nuclear power industry designed to finagle billions in loan guarantees from Congress and turn public opinion in favor of more reactors. There is nothing green about nukes nor are they by any means carbon-neutral, since greenhouse gases are generated in every stage of the nuclear cycle from cradle to... Well, there is no grave now, is there, with all the radioactive wastes that continue to plague us? Nonetheless, they propose building a second generation of nuclear reactors, threatening us with even more routine radioactive emissions, more stockpiles of deadly wastes, and more murderous Chernobyls that will further irradiate all life on the planet. We must say loudly and clearly "DON'T NUKE THE CLIMATE!"

## **Biofuels**

In order to maintain the wasteful, ruinous car/truck culture, they encourage the production of ethanol from corn and cane sugar and biodiesel from soy, rapeseed, and palm oil. Corn ethanol uses vast amounts of inputs—diesel fuel for farm machinery, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and large amounts of irrigation water, pumping the Ogallala Aquifer dry. Ethanol plants pollute the air, soil, and water. In addition, there is just something wrong with using a fermentation process that

generates carbon dioxide. Putting food in gas tanks is driving up food prices and threatening the hungry with famine. The protests in Mexico over the price of maize are an example of where things are headed. Corn ethanol is nothing but a massive subsidy to U.S. agribusiness, benefiting mostly the big producers like Archers Daniel Midland (ADM), not small family farmers. Nonetheless, there is a frantic scramble by farmers to put more acreage into corn, planting it fence to fence, causing more soil erosion, taking land out of conservation programs, and adding to the dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico. The cultivation of switchgrass on marginal lands for cellulosic ethanol is just as foolish. A monoculture does not an ecosystem make even though university types like to argue, “Oh, but it will provide habitat for wildlife before it’s mowed.”

In Brazil, cane sugar producers are expanding onto other croplands, and grain producers are moving onto grazing lands, which forces ranchers to encroach on the Amazon rainforest. Cane workers are superexploited, toiling under miserable conditions, and there is a movement against building any more ethanol plants in the country. Soy production, heavily promoted by Cargill, is also destroying huge areas of the rainforest.

In Southeast Asia, the tropical rainforests are being burned and replaced with palm oil plantations for the refinement of biodiesel, at the expense of ecosystems and the subsistence of indigenous people. Europe uses rapeseed or canola oil with absolutely no net gain in the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions—the lesson being that burning carbohydrates instead of hydrocarbons is not a solution to the climate crisis.

## Hybrid Vehicles

Encouraging the purchase of expensive hybrid motor vehicles that most cannot afford does not help the situation either. The planet can no longer spare the enormous amount of resources that go into the production of private automobiles so each of us can toot around in our own personal little bubble. As Richard Heinberg says, “We don’t need *alternative* cars. We need alternatives *to* cars!” The answer is clean mass transit run on wind and solar power. A revitalized rail system would include both light urban rail and cross-country passenger and freight service. The way to save jobs is to produce electric locomotives and train carriages. To begin, we could melt down all the cars and trucks and use the material. We must say, “Fund Clean Mass Transit, Not Big Dirty Auto!

Just a word about individual solutions to climate change: advocating investment in a hybrid or changing to compact fluorescent bulbs tends to place the blame on us rather than where it really lies—with the corporate polluters—thereby, conveniently taking them off the hook.

Most so-called energy alternatives being touted are intended to reduce the U.S. dependence upon foreign oil and enable us to keep living it up like there’s no tomorrow, rather than cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The incineration of biomass for power and heating is another thing capitalist entrepreneurs like to paint green. Wood chips and other vegetable matter should be mulched or composted so the nutrients can be returned to the soil. A wood burner was just defeated in a Minneapolis Native American and Latino neighborhood that had already been afflicted with widespread arsenic contamination from an old pesticide plant. They said, “No! We’ve had enough! Get out of here!” forcing the developers to run with their tail between their legs, unfortunately, to another neighborhood where they will have to be fought.

The emissions from refuse-derived fuel—i.e., garbage—is full of dioxins and other toxic contaminants that erode human health. Burning rubbish is nothing but a license to commit unbridled pollution. We should adopt a policy of *zero* waste by reducing, restoring, reusing and recycling at the point of production. Breaking down kitchen scraps or manure from factory farms with anaerobic digesters to produce methane is another hairbrained idea. Last time I checked, methane was still a powerful greenhouse gas exceeding the potency of CO<sub>2</sub> by 23 times. Kitchen wastes and manure—preferably from free-range, organic livestock production conducted on a modest scale—should be composted into humus then placed on the soil to re-enrich it.

## **No Burning!**

The incineration of biomass and toxic garbage is not the solution. Enough with the burning already! There should be absolutely none. Capitalism has abused the gift of fire to a frightening degree, and now we are paying the consequences dearly. There is no need to burn anything. The sun does that for us and quite efficiently, too. All we need do is harness that great flame in the heavens with the clean technologies already available. However, the capitalists prefer to burn the last of the stored ancient sunlight instead, because there's money to be made. In usual mealy-mouthed fashion, their politicians call for more research and development of alternative energies, which is another way to play for time and avoid the conversion to a green, sustainable economy.

## **Techno-fixes**

Still another indication of the bankruptcy of capitalist solutions to the climate crisis, not to mention bourgeois science, is the proliferation of technological fixes. Getting attention are such absurd ideas as the launching of mirrors into space to reflect solar radiation away from the planet. This technocratic idiocy is about as practical as colonizing the moon or terraforming Mars to create a Neo Earth. Another—on which they have actually conducted experiments—is the geoengineering plan to fertilize the oceans with iron to stimulate photosynthesis in the surface waters in order to increase carbon absorption. The result will be to alter seawater chemistry and upset the nutrient cycle Big Time.

The truth is that there are no magic solutions that will enable us to neutralize fossil fuel emissions or make them just go away, say, like sucking them out into space with a giant vacuum cleaner. We must GET REAL!, stop burning all hydrocarbons immediately, and adopt clean renewables.

## **The Bankruptcy of the Big Greens**

It is amazing how the Big Greens either support or are soft on many of these proposals. As great advocates of energy efficiency, they naturally concede to the necessity of more oil and gas extraction. However, they say “it must be done responsibly” so as not to fragment wildlife habitat or pollute our air, soil and water. One wonders how they expect that to occur. They are the ones responsible for pushing environmental regulations riddled with loopholes, and then they are surprised to find that this sieve does not hold water. These ecocrats tend to be blind to the fact that every time resources are dredged up from under the ground, toxins are released onto the surface. Being the cowards that they are, they do not possess the intestinal fortitude to fully advocate leaving the oil, gas and coal in the ground where it belongs. The party's over in more ways than one, but

they do not want to admit it, because that would make it seem that many of them are more interested in saving capitalism than they are in saving the planet.

Several slick magazines of established enviorgroups have had articles on carbon capture and sequestration without any criticism of the health, safety, or environmental impacts of these techniques. This is because deep down they hope that CSS will work so that we can continue to burn coal for the next 250 years without any consequence. Many also limit themselves to the demand for a moratorium on new coal plants without calling for the decommissioning of all those currently in operation.

Committed to continuing the car/truck culture, they advocate driving hybrids and using alternatives to gasoline rather than demanding clean mass transit exclusively, and they are also soft on burning stuff. Hopelessly weak groups, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Sierra Club, have hailed the pathetic 35-mile-per-gallon fuel-efficiency standard passed by Congress last summer as some kind of great victory when it should have been instituted decades ago! The automakers will, of course, balk at its implementation, again crying poverty despite the billions in handouts they are receiving.

And then there are the traitorous advocates of nukes like James Lovelock. Again, a number of the Big Bucks/Big Greens have published articles on nuclear power, especially when they tout nukes as being carbon-free.

The point is that these traitors to the cause of Earth and humanity must be replaced with a class-struggle left-wing of a strong, powerful, and uncompromising environmental movement led by working people in alliance with other oppressed groups in society. In addition, we must infuse this new movement with ecosocialist principles that go beyond the maintenance of capitalism and its suicidal and genocidal policies, and instead advance a zero-growth, zero-waste, steady-state, democratically planned socialist economy that puts planetary and human needs before profits. This will enable us to make peace and end the war on nature by creating a rational, humane, ecological culture and society in which we may finally live in harmony according to nature's laws, *not* those of capital.