

The Politics of Climate Change

Workers' Solidarity Movement

2010

In recent years climate change has loomed large in the public imagination. Scientifically, there is little doubt that it is a real threat to the future of human civilisation. The greenhouse effect has been known about since the early 19th century – gases in the atmosphere such as carbon dioxide, methane and water vapour trap heat from the sun, causing the climate of the planet to heat up over time. Probably the most spectacular known example of this effect in action is on Venus.

As recently as the 1960s it was thought that Venus might have a climate that could support life. However, in 1962, a US space probe measured its surface temperature at 425°C. Billions of years ago, it had a climate similar to that of earth today – but a runaway greenhouse effect turned it into a ball of fire.

The existence of the greenhouse effect is beyond doubt, as is the fact that humans have been busily pumping large volumes of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere. The only matter for scientific debate concerns exactly what effect the greenhouse gases are having on our climate. As scientists have come up with new and better ways of measuring climate changes, an alarming consensus has emerged.

The global climate has been heating up significantly due to human activity and during the course of the 21st century temperatures will rise at least 1°C more and perhaps as much as 6.5°C. This is likely to have a cataclysmic effect on human civilisation.

Most alarmingly, the melting of ice sheets will see rises in sea levels that will threaten coastal settlements, but that is not the only risk. Any increased volatility in our climate is almost certain to leave it in a state where it is much less capable of sustaining billions of people.

In many ways, the identification in advance of the great risks that human society faces from greenhouse gases is a triumph of modern science. Climatic patterns are immensely complex and to arrive at the current scientific consensus on climate change has required a vast range of sophisticated experiments, new means of measurement and exceedingly elaborate computer models.

Were it not for the powerful tools of modern science, humanity would have walked blindly into an environmental catastrophe that might have wiped it out. However, there is a big gap between understanding the problem and coming up with a way of addressing it.

Depressingly, it appears that humanity may walk into the environmental catastrophe forewarned and with eyes open. The problem is that there are several features of current human social organisation that make problems like this very difficult to address.

The first problem is that modern human economies are based around the idea of competition and the marketplace. Businesses survive and thrive in so far as they can exploit advantages over one another. A very large part of our economy is ultimately dependant on fossil fuels to provide energy – which is responsible for a large part of our greenhouse gas production.

Any decrease in the use of fossil fuels will damage or remove the competitive advantages of a great number of the world’s most powerful economic actors – the oil companies, car manufacturers and all sorts of other powerful industries. Thus, rather than attempting to figure out how to solve the problem, many of the most powerful economic actors in the world have focused instead on attempting to deny the problem and identifying ways of getting around any measures put in place to address it.

The second major problem is that, on a political level, the world is divided up into a series of nations who generally compete with each other for power and influence. All solutions to the problem of greenhouse gas production will inevitably cause some reduction in economic strength.

Any country that imposes strict measures to address the problem runs the risk of falling behind its competitors economically and politically. Hence, international agreements such as the Kyoto protocol of 1997 have been routinely ignored by powerful countries whenever they think that they will harm their position compared to their competitors.

Finally, the third major problem is that many proposed solutions do not question at all the current political and economic order. This leads to solutions such as “the power of one” – solutions based on consumer choice and education. In reality, consumers generally don’t get enough information to truly make informed choices, while very few have enough money to actually have any significant choices in the marketplace.

The major over-riding problem is that our world is organised according to competitive principles and maximising the profits of the wealthy. Given this reality, common problems that require broad, cooperative input from the entire species are difficult or impossible to address. If we can get rid of that problem, stopping and reversing climate change will be child’s play in comparison.

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