

# Global Capitalism: We Need “System Change” to Stop Climate Change

By [Chris Williams](#)

Global Research, September 18, 2014

[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

*Viking I landed on Mars, the Ramones released their first album, the Soweto Uprising began in South Africa, North and South Vietnam reunified to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and Gerald Ford was in the White House. 1976: The same year scientists discovered that refrigerant chemicals, [chlorofluorocarbons](#), better known as CFCs, were responsible for creating a hole in the ozone layer was also the last time when global average temperatures were below the 20th century norm.*

Hence, the earth has now experienced 353 consecutive months – or [an astonishing 38 years in a row](#) – of above average temperatures. In terms of hot and cold spells, snowfall patterns and the number of extremely hot or cold days, there are millions of people alive today who have no direct experience of the kind of planet their parents grew up on.

World leaders are coming to New York City this week (September 19-21) for another United Nations-sponsored summit on climate change. This time, though, they'll be greeted by the largest [climate justice march](#) in history.

For communities of small farmers and pastoralists – who number in the hundreds of millions around the world – dependent on seasonal bio-indicators for information on rainfall, planting, harvesting and herd movements, this becomes a life-and-death question. Knowledge from elders about the annual rhythms of springtime flowering; flocks of migratory birds; the emergence of butterflies, pests and other pollinating insects; trees and plants blooming; and when to expect rain is becoming dangerously unreliable, and even irrelevant.

## Drought in California

Examining the situation in the U.S., one only has to [look at the photography of drought-afflicted California](#), where 50 per cent of the fruit, nuts and vegetables for the whole United States are grown, to imagine what is going to happen to food production and the price of agricultural produce in a warming world.

The loss of water in the state – 240 gigatons of surface and groundwater, an amount equivalent to almost 10 cm (4 inches) of water spread over the entire West – is so great that [the mountains are measurably rising](#), as the weight on them diminishes.

For exactly half of those 38 years since 1976, world leaders have been discussing at international climate talks what to do about the increase in global temperatures resulting

from the burning of fossil fuels and land-use changes.

Such societal activities have increased the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the key global warming gas, from a pre-industrial level of 280 parts per million (ppm) to 400 ppm – having some time ago exceeded 350 ppm, the danger level calculated by scientists. Yet even as the science has become more definitive, and the direct impacts on our landscapes and climate ever more obvious, the political landscape has deteriorated faster than a California lake.

Indeed, world leaders and negotiators for the UN inter-governmental process on climate change, begun 19 years ago, have at this point essentially given up. The coming climate summit in Paris in December 2015 – billed as the meeting that would finally adopt an international plan for replacing the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 to deal with carbon dioxide emissions and deforestation – is already [acknowledged by participants as completely inadequate](#) and having “no chance,” more than a year before it is set to take place.

As a new report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, titled “[Expectations for a New Climate Agreement](#),” says:

“We doubt there will be negotiation specifically on quantitative national emissions reduction targets, as under the Berlin Mandate [agreed to in 1995]. Furthermore, any legal provisions included in an agreement will not be of a form requiring ratification by national legislative bodies. Involvement by the United States is crucial to any future regime, and the U.S. Senate is an impassable barrier on the horizon of COP-21 negotiations.”

So more than a year ahead of negotiations that are supposed to map out and finalize a global deal on significant emissions reductions – which in any case were not due to come into effect until five years later – we already know the outcome: there will be no specific limits on emissions or targets for setting them; nothing will be enforceable and whatever happens will be merely voluntary; and the U.S., the biggest polluter in history, will be the major obstacle.

## **100 Senators**

The “impassable barrier” of the U.S. Senate, more than half of whom are Democrats at the moment, means that 100 people – [the majority of them millionaires](#), 80 of them male, 93 of them white, 85 identifying as Christian, with an average age of 62 and an average of [more than 10 years in the same job](#) – are holding hostage 7 billion people, millions of species and the climate stability of the entire planet.

Is it any wonder that a recent Princeton study, titled “[Testing Theories of American Politics](#),” affirmed what many Americans already know: The United States of America is not a democracy in any meaningful sense. The report notes:

“In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule – at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the U.S. political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.”

The study also reports: “The net alignments of the most influential, business oriented

groups are negatively related to the average citizen's wishes." Which means that not only do ordinary people in the United States have virtually no influence on government policy, despite formal national elections which might suggest otherwise, but the policies that are enacted under the influence of a small economic and political elite are contrary to the expressed desires of the majority of the population.

Many examples related to issues like taxing the rich, public healthcare and education could be cited. On the environmental front, several polls show majorities in favor of stronger U.S. government action on climate change. And contrary to a popular myth, the polls show [consistently higher support from people of color](#), due to the fact that they are most directly, immediately and [worst affected by environmental problems](#).

## **System Change**

In short, more and more people around the world are recognizing the need for "system change."

They want to prevent not only climate change, but address a host of social issues generated by the continued operation of capitalism that are inextricably intertwined with our ecological problems: growing inequality, ossified class structures with rigid or only downward mobility, structural and institutional racism, massive and ongoing gender disparities, giant corporate conglomerations immune to democratic oversight or governance, restrictive and debt-laden higher education, the progressive erosion of civil liberties, state-directed warfare with no regard for the casualties. Now, we can add to that list the almost complete lack of real democracy in a country that is supposedly defined by that characteristic.

On a global scale, [as I have written elsewhere](#), states organized competitively against one another are subject to two dynamics, which combine to prevent an internationally coordinated effort to reverse climate change and preclude any long-term ecological resolution within the confines of capitalist economics:

"The need for constant growth is endemic to capitalism and therefore makes it impossible to find a permanent solution to environmental degradation within a competitive, profit-driven system. Alongside that is a second fatal - and under-appreciated - anti-ecological contradiction of capitalism: the international competition between nation states over resources and political hegemony."

In a rather surprising inclusion to the Princeton report on democracy in the U.S., the authors make note of essentially the same analysis:

"Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of the capitalist state hold that economic classes - and particularly the bourgeoisie, the owners of the means of production - dominate policy making and cause the state to serve their material interests. As the [Communist Manifesto](#) put it, 'The bourgeoisie has...conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'."

Hence, in order to solve the interlocked combination of social and ecological problems generated by an economic and political system driven solely by profit, one which serves the interests of only a tiny minority of the world's population, we need to have a vision for an entirely different system of organizing production.

In order to achieve that vision, we will need to build a movement that harnesses the collective power of the 99 per cent of humanity who have a stake in overturning capitalism and replacing it with a more democratic, inclusive, cooperative and needs-based socio-ecological system for producing the things we need to stay alive.

Such a system requires rational and coordinated long-term planning, another feature inimical to the anarchy dictated by 'market forces'. Thus, for example, the response to the drought in California is not to switch water supplies over to crops with less intensive water requirements, but to ones that offer higher economic value.

Deeper wells are required to reach groundwater, increasing unsustainable pumping rates by using larger and larger diesel-fueled pumps – so the system is simultaneously exacerbating local air pollution, saline intrusion and land subsidence. Because water flows underground, each farmer or corporation – [many of which are using completely outdated water-saving technologies](#), based on 7,000-year-old technology, if they are using such methods at all – is in direct competition with surrounding farms to dig deeper wells, acquire larger pumps, and pump out groundwater before their neighbors.

Nonsensically, though 80 per cent of water in California is used for agricultural purposes, the onus has been on individual consumers to reduce *their* water use, not Big Ag – even though this makes no sense in terms of achieving radical reductions in water use. Indeed, the 3.9 million people of Los Angeles already use less water than other U.S. cities and less per capita than they did in 1980.

Such is the irrational, unplanned and frankly absurd nature of capitalism that the thriving new business in California is [companies that paint lawns and grass green](#) – using, of all things, water-based paints.

The process of financial accumulation for short-term profit at the expense of both people and the environment, was described in the fugitive slave narrative of Charles Bell, as he traveled north, in terms that are startlingly contemporary:

“They are attempting to perform impossibilities – to draw the means of supporting a life of idleness, luxury and splendor from a once generous, but long since worn-out and exhausted soil – a soil which, carefully used, would at this day have richly repaid the toils of a husbandman, by noble abundance of all the comforts of life; but which, tortured into barrenness by the double curse of slavery and tobacco, stands as...a monument to the poverty and punishment which Providence has decreed as the reward of idleness and tyranny.”

By contrast, a rational society based on cooperative, bottom-up democracy would use a combination of science, the best available technology, and local knowledge of weather patterns, soil, agriculture and food needs to decide where and what to plant and farm in any given location.

Those decisions would rest on a comprehensive analysis of the type of crop, based on agricultural, ecological, climatic, cultural and social factors, and how to embed those crops among other crops, animals and humans to create a sustainable and functional, integrated ecosystem – one that can, in combination and consultation with other agricultural regions, provide nutritious food and a balanced diet for a wider population.

Not only do ecosocialists see the problem of climate change as related to an entire social and economic system that needs to be confronted – because we are talking about requisitioning \$10-trillion in wealth held by fossil fuel corporations alone – but our vision for that alternative also has to be holistic. It must make the connections between different struggles and unite the forces capable of making such a vision a reality.

## **Organizing for Change**

How can we organize ourselves to carry out a social and ecological revolution on a planetary scale? As we approach the midpoint of the second decade of the 21st century, knowing the urgency of our project, its all-encompassing nature, the legacy of past defeats and disorganization among our own ranks, such a task appears daunting.

Nevertheless, clearly, the vast majority of us have an interest in doing so. Therefore, the question becomes one of motivation, potential and organization. Is the need to organize such a movement as powerful as the need that led to the rise of the abolitionists and the struggle against slavery? Indeed, that titanic struggle – which brought about a revolutionary change in production methods and turned millions of African-Americans from slaves into free men and women – offers lessons in who can effect profound social change.

It was the slaves themselves, responsible for cutting the cane, drying the tobacco and farming the cotton, who were the decisive social force in turning the Civil War between ruling-class factions into a revolutionary one that undermined production in the South and led to the non-compensated multibillion-dollar dispossession of the Southern slaveocracy.

While social movements throughout history have been and are powerful social actors, it is the collective power of people in factories, fields and offices to stop production of the things that the capitalists need to sell that is the crucial motive force and lever, capable of turning social revolt into social revolution. While this force may appear dormant, perhaps, to some – even extinguished within the U.S. – working people, and even more so working people of color and the part of the workforce who are women, are disproportionately affected by ecological issues and so not only have a direct interest in fighting for ecological sanity, but also the power to effectively do so.

Which is why working-class struggles have often featured an environmental component, around questions of housing, air and water pollution, transportation, sanitation, town planning, environmental and workplace toxins. Those struggles are often mis-categorized as purely social, and omitted from histories of environmental reforms and how they were won. They are, nevertheless, a necessary and essential component of success.

Union members in the U.S. are beginning to [recognize the importance of fighting](#) for improved sanitation infrastructure, public transit and a new energy grid, free of fossil fuels – even if this is sometimes in contrast to the attitudes of their union leaders. Such struggles will only succeed with a rebalancing of social power in working people’s favor, not simply as a transition to different forms of energy.

Huey P. Newton, a leader of the Black Panther Party of the 1960s, firmly believed – following Karl Marx – that environmental problems were an outgrowth of capitalist economics and, as such, had to be taken up as a central part of the Panthers’ program. Newton argued that revolutionaries needed to see “pollution for what it is – war against nature, war against people, against the race itself, against the unborn.”

Moving toward a holistic understanding of nature and humanity's place on the planet, Newton stressed that the underlying philosophy of the Black Panther Party must reject the very idea of nation states and be "founded on the basic concept of the unity of nature underlying and transcending all arbitrary national and geographical divisions."

Achieving such a vision of a borderless world, where humanity and nature are intimately connected and co-evolutionary, will be a giant task. But if we examine our history, it is not one without precedent. It will require building organizational strength, as the coalition [System Change Not Climate Change](#) is attempting to do, as well as international solidarity among the 99 per cent - among the people of the factories, forests and fields. We also need political clarity about the systemic nature of the fight, as will be debated and discussed at the [Climate Convergence](#) in New York City on September 19-20, with hundreds of activists from across the globe.

There is no time like the present to be part of that fight. •

**Chris Williams** is author of [Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis](#), and writes for [Socialist Workers](#) where this article first appeared.

The original source of this article is [Socialist Project](#)  
Copyright © [Chris Williams](#), [Socialist Project](#), 2014

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Chris Williams](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)