

Rio+20 climate conference: “An epic failure”

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The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which drew to a close in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil last Friday, has been denounced by environmental advocates as a “hoax” and “an epic failure.” Despite already low expectations before the meeting, the summit testifies to the stagnation in global efforts to address the looming climate crisis.

The climate conference was dubbed Rio+20 because it took place 20 years after the first United Nations Earth Summit, also held in the Brazilian metropolis. At that summit, broad goals were negotiated to control greenhouse gas emissions, protect ecosystems and biodiversity, and prevent desertification. These pledges, largely aspirational and without specific targets or enforcement, have gone unrealized in the subsequent two decades.

Last week’s summit, despite 20 years of climate science demonstrating in increasingly stark terms the gravity of the looming ecological crisis, achieved nothing more than a weak affirmation of the 1992 document.

Titled “The Future We Want,” the 58-page document agreed on by the assembled delegates is a demonstration of the massive political power of the world’s financial aristocracy. Focusing on so-called “sustainable development” and the “green economy,” the agreement calls mainly for future discussions of environmental issues within the framework of “a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and the private sector.”

US secretary of state Hilary Clinton, in her remarks to the conference, underscored the reality that any effort to address pollution and climate change is subservient to the interests of the corporate elite, particularly that of the United States. She asserted, “the most compelling products of this conference are the examples of new thinking.” What sorts of new thinking does Clinton, and the Obama administration that she represents, have in mind?

In her speech, Clinton, after referencing deceased Apple CEO Steve Jobs, exhorted attendees to think about “harnessing the power of the market,” and claimed that “private sector investments, using targeted resources and smart policies, have catalyzed more balanced, inclusive, sustainable growth.”

In other words, the climate policy of the Obama administration amounts to nothing more than a corporate boondoggle under the guise of supporting the “green economy.” Clinton pointed to “\$20 billion in U.S. Government funding to unlock hundreds of millions of dollars in private financing for clean energy projects in Africa and beyond,” as well as the “power of the market” for “supporting consumer research and creating incentives for manufacturers.”

She pointed to the construction sector as an important investment opportunity, and advised

her audience to “think different [sic] about how we recognize the needs of workers” and “use the private sector, particularly the consumer goods companies, as they have agreed to do, to make sure they have sustainable supply chains, the right kind of packaging and marketing.”

One would almost think of such a speech as addressing an investment forum rather than a climate summit.

Clinton ended her remarks by calling for a new type of cooperation between “the nonprofits, the civil society organizations, faith groups, individuals, all of us.” This call to shift responsibility for dealing with the global ecological crisis to local organizations and individuals represents a rejection of any responsibility on the part of the American bourgeoisie.

Despite denunciation of the summit as a “hoax” and “an epic failure” by Oxfam and Greenpeace, respectively, these organizations, paralyzed by the pro-capitalist politics of the petty-bourgeois “green” movement, can offer no solution to the crisis. Faced with the bankruptcy of negotiations between rival capitalist nation-states, Jim Leape of the World Wildlife Fund essentially parrots Clinton’s line, calling for “looking for changes everywhere—communities, cities, national governments and companies.”

The reality is that the American government has not merely failed to advance and strengthen solutions to climate change, but has actively undermined any serious attempt to address the pending ecological crisis if it cuts across corporate interests.

In negotiations leading up to the Rio+20 summit, US negotiators removed a provision providing for protection of parts of the ocean from mining and a reaffirmation of the obligation of businesses to protect human rights.

At the summit, US delegates attempted to change language regarding “common but differentiated responsibility,” which places the onus for addressing climate change on the developed countries that have contributed most to it. American negotiators wanted to make such responsibility contingent on concomitant action by developing nations, but the change in language was rejected.

This failure to drop references to the special responsibility of developed countries for addressing ecological problems they have caused was presented as the major success of the summit.

President Barack Obama declined to attend the summit in Rio de Janeiro, underscoring the low priority he has given to addressing climate change. A stark example of the role Obama has played in past negotiations occurred at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference.

The Copenhagen conference was called to draft a binding treaty regulating greenhouse gases to replace the Kyoto protocol (which US administrations have consistently refused to ratify). During a meeting with other heads of state over a climate treaty, Obama abruptly broke off negotiations, saying, “all of us obviously have extraordinarily important other business to attend to.” The result was a brief three-page conference statement without any binding commitments to actual emission reductions.

The lack of seriousness and the pro-corporate stance that the Obama administration has taken with regard to addressing climate change on the international scale is of a piece with

its response to the economic crisis: all other considerations must be subordinated to the interests of America's corporate and financial aristocracy.

In the context of a capitalist world economy, dominated by the conflicts among rival nation-states, no progressive solution to the climate crisis is possible.

The control of the corporate elites over all political and economic decisions means that no fundamental issue, from unemployment to climate change, can be addressed by governments with more than lip-service and pro-business policies that only exacerbate the crisis.

The problems of pollution and climate change will only be dealt with seriously if the political stranglehold of the wealthy is broken by a unified and politically conscious movement of the working class.

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