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The Paris Climate Talks: A Victory for President Obama a Defeat for the Planet and a Challenge to the Climate Justice Movement



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The just concluded Paris Climate Conference--the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—was a critical juncture in human and planetary history. Could the world’s governments, all representing Homo sapiens often at war with each other, come together to stop the capitalist and carbon-based catastrophe. That climate catastrophe—in less than 300 years through the U.S. and European Industrial Counter-revolution—is destroying all that God and Nature created for millions of years—since the last Mass Extinction.

As the world’s emperors in varying degrees of clothes congratulated themselves the rest of us are looking at a 3 degree world — three degrees Celcius over “pre-industrial levels—in which 775 million people in Sub Saharan Africa are facing a world of catastrophic heat, droughts, floods, and famine. The pre-determined outcome in Paris was that the United States and President Obama needed a political victory more than the planet needed one—and that all the Parties, despite enormous antagonisms and conflicts of interests, would yield to the will of the world’s policeman and sole superpower. President Obama’s unique combination of charm, diplomacy, charisma, political will, and brute force gave him the victory that he needed. But for a climate justice movement that is just coming into being we are facing our own challenge—can we convince people to give a

damn enough to want to know the truth and then can we get them to bring real structural demands on our own government, in this case President Barack Hussein Obama.

The battle over Paris is not at all over—in fact, it is just beginning. The battle over the sum-up of this historic 21st Conference of the Parties (thus COP 21) is the critical scientific, ideological, and political baseline in the battle between real hope and real despair.

Let me summarize some of the key battles that we have to fight and win that were not won in Paris.

The Paris Agreement--unless overturned by other movements and structures--is locking in a 3 Degree Celsius world. The Intended Nationally Determined Contributions in Paris (in which, under U.S. pressure, cannot be enforced through treaty language) will lead to an increase in the average world’s temperature of more than 3 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels planet by 2050 if not sooner. For decades scientists have warned that the world’s average temperature cannot exceed 2 degrees Celsius. But that would involve stopping the oil and gas energy world in its tracks. Today, as the world temperature already averages almost 1 degree, (and in some areas like Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arctic is more like 1.2 degrees) enormous climate suffering is already taking place all over the world. The United States and its closest allies—Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand—and apparently most of the world’s governments, are celebrating that the text refers to keeping temperature “well below 2 degrees” and adds that the governments will try to “limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C.”

But why celebrate the mention of 1.5 Degrees C as a victory if there are no pledges let alone binding commitments to make that even remotely possible? If it is now agreed upon that if every Intended Nationally Determined Contribution—and even those are not legally enforceable—will lead to a Three Degree World then why boast about mentioning levels of 1.5 degrees or 2 degrees when everyone knows they cannot be met. How can we turn this hypocrisy from celebration to outrage? This was a victory for President Obama, a defeat for the planet, and a challenge to the Climate Justice Movement.

The United States prevented any language for climate reparations.

The U.S. representatives, John Kerry and Todd Stern, carrying out President Obama's orders, adamantly opposed any language that would have held the U.S. and E.U. responsible for the Industrial Counter-revolution of their own making and the astounding role the U.S. has played and is still playing in warming the planet. Nations of the Third World have been calling on the Global North to pay for what is called "loss and damages" so that those most responsible for the climate crisis pay reparations to those who are suffering its catastrophic impacts—in particular the nations of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Small Island States. But U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who once spoke out against U.S. war crimes in Vietnam, threatened a U.S. walk-out if there was any language in the text that tied "loss and damages" to any payments reparations, obligations, or remedies. The Obama administration's victory exceeded these reprehensible objectives. Not only did the "text" not provide help, it tried to codify the end of any claims against the Climate Perpetrators. The final document states, that "any discussion of loss and damages *does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation.*"

The Bush administration walked out of the World Conference Against Racism because of resolutions condemning Israeli violations of the human rights

of the Palestinian people and resolutions calling on the United States and Europe to pay reparations to the nations and peoples of Africa, Black people in the United States, and all those in the African Diaspora for the crimes of the TransAtlantic slave trade. This time the Obama administration, more powerful and effective than the Bush administration in suppressing the voice of the Third World, first threatened to walk out, and then averted it by browbeating nations into giving away their rights to "liability or compensation." But, how in the world can poor nations dependent on coal for energy make a transition to cleaner fuels without major funding from the arch polluters? Why won't the U.S. accept responsibility for both liability and compensation? Because once they opened that door it might cost them hundreds of billions of dollars and some estimate trillions in damages to truly pay for "loss and damages." The only saving grace is that this language is not controlling in front of any international body or court—in that, also under U.S. pressure, this U.N. Document is not legally binding. Thus, it can be challenged in other public and international arenas. Still, it is a massive victory in the realm of ideology and precedent. This is another political victory for the Obama administration and and yes, another defeat for the planet and challenge to the Climate Justice Movement.

President Obama, John Kerry, and chief U.S. negotiator Todd Stern effectively put the blame on China and India and all those still in the developing world.

At the 1992 U.N. Rio Conference that first set goals on climate change there was great hope. The Third World put forth and the body accepted the concept of "Common But Differentiated Responsibilities". (CBDR.) Under this view, the "Developed" and most polluting countries had a unique responsibility to solve the climate crisis of their own making. You have to go to the U.N. to fully grasp that virtually every country in Latin America (Spanish) Africa (English and French) and

Asia (English and French) is speaking the language of the occupying powers that colonized their societies. Most of these nations just won their formal independence after World War II and many are still occupied or dominated by the U.S. and the E.U. India and China are two rising world economic powers who are burning enormous amounts of coal and have profound income disparities in their societies. But while demands on India and China to cap and reduce their emissions—especially by their own people—are absolutely on target the U.S. has a far bigger target. It wants to destroy the entire concept of CBDR and as such to equate its own historically destructive role and present obscene GHG emissions with those of the newly emerging Asian industrial societies—as well as virtually every other Third World nation. The U.S. is now arguing, as Todd Stern aggressively told us at one of the UNFCCC Press conferences, that this is not 1992 and “we” are now all in this together and the past does not matter. This allows the U.S. to remain the world’s military superpower (that does not allow its military emissions to be even counted) as it goes on the ideological and military offensive against everybody but itself. Again, a great victory for the Obama administration, a defeat for the planet, and a challenge to the Climate Justice Movement.

The President’s actual stated commitments to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in Paris are only 14 percent of 1990 levels—one of the weakest proposals of a major power let alone the world’s still greatest polluter by per capita emissions. President Obama has told the world he plans to cut U.S. emissions by 28 percent by 2025. But he has achieved that projection through a math trick in the long tradition of American Deceptionalism. While the rest of the world has pledged to reduce emissions from 1990 levels the President just asserted that the U.S. would use 2005 as its base. As a result, a 28 percent reduction in U.S. GHG emissions, already so weak on its own terms, is actually 14 percent. And again, this is a victory for President Obama, a defeat for the Planet, and a challenge to the Climate Justice Movement.

The United States imposed its will on the world’s nations and, in Paris, broke the back of any effective resistance to its domination of the United Nations. The United Nations has long been a center of international public opinion where resolutions, while not binding, can in fact be a factor in world history. This is why the U.S. invested so much in the UNFCCC—it understood that it had to win the ideological argument to in fact restrict its commitment to fight climate change against those proposing far more radical and binding reductions. In 2009 President Obama, just a year into office, strong-armed the nations of the world in Copenhagen, at the last major U.N. Climate Change Conference, to blame China, isolate those calling for more stringent measures, and let the U.S. off the hook.

In 2015, President Obama has upped his game in Paris to truly become the world’s most intimidating political figure. He has manipulated the resistance of Small Island and African nations who see him as a sympathetic figure—if not really a friend. His plea that the world must help him avert defeat in front of the racist Republicans, an argument that boggles the mind on its face, has had some resonance—combined with 800 military bases, economic “incentives” aka bribes, threats, and a nuclear arsenal. Barack Obama’s electoral victories, in 2008 and 2012 (which many of us participated in and supported) were the product of the victories of the civil rights movement, growing anti-racist sentiment in the U.S., and his own deceptive but still far more progressive campaign—and all of our hopes for his success. He used that credibility and good will to bring great attention to himself and the U.S. as the savior of the planet—at the same time knowing that U.S. actions will bring inordinate suffering into the world and especially to the nations and peoples of Africa, Asian, Latin America, and the Small Island States. This is a victory for himself but a terrible defeat for the civil rights and climate justice movements but far more important, a terrible defeat for the planet. And yes, a monumental challenge to the dissenting voices who are fighting to get our point of view heard let alone our plans carried out in history.

So Where is the Hope?

Many environmental and climate justice groups came to Paris with plans and hopes to influence its outcome. Some are declaring victory and joining in the celebrations. But, for those of us who disagree, and see it as a life and death disagreement, we must soberly look at the results and ask the hard questions, “What are the limits and weaknesses in our own work?” and “Where do we go from here.” Let me give just one example, the work of my own organization, because right now it is the only work I can explain on its own terms—as part of a far larger puzzle and plan of groups working all over the world.

Our organization, the Labor/Community Strategy Center, came to Paris with an aggressive tactical plan. We wanted to bring four major demands in front of President Obama and the United States at UNFCCC.

- ***The United States must cut its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50 percent of 1990 levels by 2025 -- starting now!***
- ***The United States must contribute \$10 billion a year into the United Nations Green Climate Fund -- starting now!***
- ***The United States must Bring Back 100,000 Black internally displaced residents to New Orleans —with jobs, housing, and medical benefits—starting now!***
- ***The United States must end the federal Department of Defense 1033 Program that gives military grade weapons to local and state police forces including school police***

Five of us from the Strategy Center, Manuel Criollo, Barbara Lott-Holland, Channing Martinez, Ashley Franklin and I worked day and night to bring these demands to the attention of NGO delegates, activists from all over the world, members of world governments, and to visitors to

the Climate Generations Space in the Le Bourget facility next to the U.N. meetings. We had hoped, as part of a larger NGO and grassroots Climate Justice Movement, to create a counter-narrative to the president’s premature celebration and to put some public pressure on the president.

In our view, we fell far short of our expectations.

The main problem was that given what often appeared as the unbroken unity of the world’s governments, even though we knew of course there were massive struggles taking place behind the scenes, there was no focused or coherent resistance in Paris in any of the spheres and no agreement on demands, tactics, or a common plan of action.

The Climate Justice Movement is trying to become a real movement—and is composed of many good people doing good work and trying, like we are, to make a difference. But until there is some real agreement on demands, tactics, political perspective and real forms of organization to carry them out we are all running uphill with lead weights on.

Similarly, there was no coherent public agreement on demands by the world’s governments—not the E.U., not the G 77 and China, not the Small Island States. But there was great unity of politics and tactical plan by the U.S. and what is now called “The Umbrella Group”—U.S., Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway. As such, there were no world governments to ally with either—because none of them wanted to wage an open and aggressive fight with the U.S.

So, we go back to Los Angeles exhausted but actually inspired. We met a lot of great people doing very impressive work. We learned how to function effectively under very difficult objective conditions. We return to our work in Los Angeles and with other groups in Black and Latino communities in the U.S. with a lot more optimism and determination. We appreciate the work of

Demand Climate Justice, the Third World Network, and the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice organizing in Historically Black Colleges and Universities with whom we worked, for helping to lead the most coherent alternative narrative possible under the circumstances.

We said our main objective in Paris was to learn—and damn, learn we did. We stayed up every night to read, write, plot and plan with others. We come back with more wisdom from all the work we and learned more from trying to swim in such deep waters. We came back with more respect for the U.N. as a structure where all the governments of the world are fighting for the future of the planet and where it is at least historically possible to challenge the unchallenged power of the United States. And like running up a hill with lead weights, our legs have gotten stronger for the long distance run.

The fight over the historical record in Paris is a critical frontier for the climate justice movement. It is essential in the next days, weeks, and months to explain to people that the great hopes of the United Nations Framework Climate Change Conference were brought to a massive defeat by the power of the U.S. and the Obama administration and a lack of political clarity, political will, and at times, lack of political courage by other world governments

But the moral, political, and ecological imperatives of the climate crisis are creating a very volatile world climate. The many contradictions inside the world that the U.S. was temporarily able to suppress can erupt, like a volcano or a Category 5 hurricane, at any moment. We need to be organized for when, not if, that historical opportunity comes. This article, and its effort to challenge the president's master narrative, is a small tactic to help bring the climate revolution onto center stage. And for that, Paris was a great success, because there is now a far greater world audience that does give a damn and wants to know and shape the future of the planet and all living things on it. As taxi drivers, waiters, and people on the street told us when they found out we were working at the UNFCCC and COP 21, "Thank you for fighting for the planet."

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