

WHAT DO WE DO AFTER THE COP?

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The COP26 United Nations climate conference in Glasgow is the third key moment in the history of the talks. At the Copenhagen COP in 2009 the movement was defeated, and we knew it. At Paris in 2015 the movement was fooled. Both COPs left the movement exhausted and demoralised.

This time it is obvious going in that Glasgow will be a shitshow. So this time we need to think going in, how we can come out fighting.

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My basic argument is this: the climate movement is at an impasse. The leaders of the world will not act. That means we must build mass movements from below to replace those leaders. But those mass movements will wither if they only protest. We have to fight *for* action that will halt climate change.

Promises are no longer enough. The most important task right now is to stop almost all burning of coal, oil and gas. We could start that process immediately and go all the way. To do that we have build enough renewables to provide energy for all electricity, all heating, all industry and almost all transport. Then we can ban coal, oil and gas.

But to get there we must move beyond the market, because only governments can spend that much money and pass the necessary laws. And doing that can create hundreds of millions of new, permanent jobs around the world. And we cannot do that without an explosion of democracy – the power of the people.

This is not a personal manifesto. I am trying to bring together feelings and ideas I can see bursting out all over the climate movement. And to explain how they give us reason to fight for love against death.

Along the way I will paint a picture of what runaway climate change will do to human society that you may find surprising. I take up the common arguments in the climate movement about why a fully renewable world cannot work. I touch on other confusions and controversies that cannot be ignored.

These are complex matters, and this is only an article. Perforce, it is full of assertions, generalisations and simplifications. The detailed technical arguments and supporting data can be found in my book *Fight the Fire: Green New Deals and Global Climate Jobs*. You can [download it for free as a PDF or an e-book](#) on *The Ecologist* website now.

PART ONE

THE IMPASSE IN CLIMATE POLITICS

Now to the details of the argument. First, let's look at how the climate movement reached the impasse in which we find ourselves today.

COPs happen every year. But the Glasgow COP is a key moment when new agreements are supposed to be reached and new promises made.

We have emerged confused and weakened from two previous key COPs before, at Copenhagen in 2009 and the Paris in 2015. The lessons of those key moments in the COP process are relevant to understanding our situation today.

At Copenhagen in 2009, the NGOs and many campaigners went in expecting to come out with a win. The Kyoto Protocol was coming to an end, and they thought it would be replaced by something better.

Barack Obama was the new president of the United States. He replaced George Bush, who had started the Iraq War and taken the US out of the Kyoto Protocol. Obama seemed to be on our side, and most campaigners trusted him.

In Britain, where I live, we had the largest climate march ever just before the COP. Most of the organisers of the march felt we were going to Copenhagen to support the climate efforts of our Labour prime minister, Gordon Brown.

That was not what happened. Obama came to the Copenhagen COP on the last day. That morning he met with President Xi of China. That afternoon the two of them rammed through a new global agreement. Three pages long, that agreement said that from now on every

country would be allowed to choose their own level of emissions. Each country could emit more in future, or less. Unlike Kyoto, no country was obliged to meet any limits. There would be no enforcement mechanism and no sanctions.

Many NGOs, unions and campaigns came away from Copenhagen making statements about how this was a step forward. But they knew what they were saying was untrue. We all knew. The evidence was that the climate movement stalled almost completely for three years. We had been beaten.

Finally the First Nations native communities in Canada, and then in the United States, rose up against pipelines and fracking. This bold model of resistance from below gave new heart to the climate movement in many countries.

Paris

Then came the Paris COP in 2015. This time the movement was fooled, not defeated.

Paris was a key moment because all the governments in the world were supposed to come up with new, better promises to reduce emissions. Or maybe, as with China, not to increase them as fast as before.

The promises came in. But add them up and they meant that total global greenhouse gas emissions would increase for at least fifteen more years. Then it would take a further fifteen years until global emissions sank back down to the already much too high levels of 2015.

The numbers were appalling, but there was a con job to distract us. The promise was a joint commitment by all parties to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees centigrade. That was a far more stringent level than the former goal of two degrees. Good. This seemed like progress and the 1.5 limit consoled many people.

But the con job could not be squared with the increasing emissions in the national promises. So the greenwash machine came up with a new promise. We were told that all the countries would make new promises at the COP in 2020 – now postponed to 2021 because of Covid. And those new promised emissions would be far lower.

Fridays for the Future

Many were skeptical but felt helpless until Greta Thunberg inspired a movement of millions of school students. This movement was a decisive step forward, for several reasons.

First, although it was strongest in Europe and Australia, the movement aspired to be global, and there were smaller strikes throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Second, the tactic of choice was the strike. That was the traditional weapon of working class struggle. The heart of the movement was expressed in the two words on her original placard – Climate Strike. And strikes are an act of defiance.

Third, until the school strikes most climate action had been by minorities appearing on the streets, brought together by a cause. The school students were trying to move majorities, to move their organic communities, because they were trying to bring whole schools out on strike.

Fourth, this was the entrance of a new generation onto the stage of history. And they bring a new politics. In most countries the people under thirty are now far more radical in most countries than the people over thirty. But the people of eighteen and under are far more radical than the people over eighteen.

The weight of numbers mean it will be a long time before these young people, and those that follow, will be a majority. But they are already the leaders of the movement, as they are in street revolts for democracy and against racism and sexism all over the world.

Finally, Thunberg told the truth, and so did all her followers. That swept away much of the spin, the lies, the contortions and the misplaced loyalties that had held back the climate movement since Copenhagen.

In spite of this clarity, the greenwash continues to distract. There is still confusion about what can and must be done. But what the school strikers have done is to expose the key problem of our epoch – that we must act, and that all our leaders stand in our way.

Towards the Glasgow COP

Now, in 2021, the new national promises are coming in. Taken together, they mean there is no way at all we can keep the increase in temperature to under 1.5 degrees. And promises that are not kept, and which you knew you would never keep, are not failures. They are lies.

This is now widely known. When Greta Thunberg says that all the leaders of the world have failed us, she is right. When she says that everything the politicians say is blah-blah-blah, she is right. And everyone knows she is right.

One half of all the increase in CO₂ in the air has happened since 1985. One quarter of all the increase has happened since 2004. This enormous change has happened during the years when climate change was not a secret, when the UN and leaders all over the world were promising to do something.

They give us promises that emissions will be net zero by 2050, 2040 or 2030. And the sum of their policies make sure that emissions will be higher in 2022 than in 2021, and higher still in 2023.

So millions have learned to pay no more attention to these promises. Everyone involved, whether with official climate policy or in climate struggle, knows that Thunberg is right.

So the world leaders are forced to sit in the audience and listen to Thunberg castigate them. Look at us, they say, aren't we good? You can see we are on her side, because we are allowing her to shame us.

They clap her. But still they don't act.

Biden

In the days leading up to this COP things got worse.

Like Obama before him, Joe Biden had been the hope of the mainstream climate movement. Biden was clearly not Trump, the climate denier, the liar, the woman hater, the Muslim hater, the white supremacist. Biden brought the US back into the COP process. He talked the talk. But now he comes to Glasgow with nothing to show.

Numbers tell the scale of that failure. In 2019 Congress, and Trump, passed bills allocating \$2.9 trillion for Covid recovery. The US Federal Reserve Bank invented another \$4 trillion in loans and stimulus.

By contrast, between 1941 and 1945 the US government spent a total of \$4 trillion in today's money on military spending for the whole of World War Two. Or to make another comparison, the stimulus from the Congress and the Federal Reserve were equal to a quarter of total US GDP in 2019.

This was what was possible in response to Covid, a brutal disaster, but far, far less destructive than climate change will be.

Once elected Biden proposed spending \$4 trillion on a host of programs, a proportion of that for climate change. But there was a trick in the numbers. That was \$4 trillion *over 10 years*. Now he has scaled that down to \$1.85 trillion over 10 years. That is only \$185 billion a year.

Of that there is only \$55 billion a year is for climate. That may sound like a lot. It is only three dollars a week per American. Under Trump in 2020 the American government spent more than 50 times that much on Covid measures.

Moreover, Biden's is a ten-year plan. This is a commitment to do far, far too little for the whole of the next crucial decade. And Biden is coming to Glasgow without even that bill passed. He has not walked the walk, and how he will not be able to sit the sit.

What I say here will seem harsh to many Americans who voted for Biden. It will seem utterly undeserved. They say that Biden has tried. The people to blame are all the Republican senators, and the two renegade Democrats, Manchin and Sinema, who between them mean Biden cannot win a majority in the Senate.

That is true, and fair. But there is another truth. Bernie Sanders, on the campaign trail in the Democratic primaries for president in 2016, was repeatedly asked a question. The interviewer would say: Your

policies are radical. You know perfectly well that there is no way you can get them through Congress. What do you say?

Again and again, Sanders replied: There is no way I can get my policies through Congress. I have spent decades in Congress. I know those people. But there is a power that can get those policies through Congress. For instance, I have promised to make student loans free and abolish student debt. If Congress will not pass that, I will call on the young people of America, in their millions, to descend on Congress and force them to pass what the American people had voted for.

The point Sanders made is crucial all round the world. For we must hope to elect governments that will take the necessary action to stop burning fossil fuels.

And we will be fools to trust the people we elect to carry out their promises when they face all the pressures of office and 'reality'. So we will have to descend on Washington and all the other capitals, in our millions, to strike and occupy, and make them do what the people elected them to do.

By contrast, faced with the defiance of Manchin and Sinema, Biden mobilised no one. Instead, he met privately, in his own home in Delaware, with Manchin and Sinema, to persuade them, to negotiate with them, to see what they would settle for. He did not campaign across the country, as Trump would have. He did not even address Congress.

Recall what the students say. All our leaders have betrayed us. The custom in the climate movement has been to pour scorn on all the previous leaders, and then give our current leaders a pass, always looking to the great new hope. The time for conning ourselves in this way has now passed.

China

It was not just Biden and the United States who folded in the days leading up to Glasgow. Many in the movement have pinned some of their hopes on China. Some environmentalists imagine it will take a dictatorship to push through and enforce action on climate. They believe ordinary people are greedy. For others an old cold-war delusion has persisted that China was somehow socialist.

Those who have looked to China have had to overlook reality. President Xi had indeed improved his promises. But he was still promising that Chinese emissions would increase until 2030.

There did seem to be one bright spot. Consumption of coal in China had more than tripled between 1998 and 2013. But then it remained pretty steady until 2020. And China announced that it would no longer fund new coal mines and power stations as part of the Belt and Road Alliance.

Then China hit the same Covid energy crunch as did much of the world, with declining supplies and escalating prices. The Chinese government response, just before the COP, was to instruct their corporations to procure as much fossil energy as possible, from any possible domestic or foreign source. And they instructed corporations to ramp up coal production and imports.

And in the run up to Glasgow, we learned that President Xi would not be attending the COP this time. Nor would President Putin of Russia, the godfather of the global alliance of fossil fuels with far-right racism and misogyny.

These gestures are powerful on a symbolic plane. On a practical one, they damn the talks to irrelevance.

Meanwhile, shame forbids me to speak of Boris Johnson and the United Kingdom, the hosts of COP 26. So that's where we are. The leaders of the world have been exposed, and they are walking away.

Outside and Inside

This means there is now a great disjunction between the movement outside and the delegates inside the walls of the COP.

In previous COPs, the NGOs, the campaigns and the unions outside have mostly taken sides on the same issues as the delegates are debating inside. The movement outside has been the radical wing of the process.

Now outside and inside are talking about quite different things. Look for instance at the admirable demands of the COP26 Coalition, the alliance of NGOs, campaigns and unions. Inside the delegates will be debating the terms of the surrender and covering shit in desperate layers of whitewash. But it is not quite that simple.

For there are 15,000 official delegates, many from governments, but many also from NGOs, campaigns and unions. And the great majority of them, even the great majority of the government delegates, know that Thunberg is right. They will have, they must have, various ways of justifying what is happening to themselves. But they know. And whenever they dare, they too leak, whisper or scream the truth.

There is a deep disjunction. We are at an impasse. The climate movement has made the world aware of the hell that looms. The student strikers have made the world aware that the leaders of the world have failed.

We, the movement, have marched. We have shamed the leaders. We have forced them to declare emergencies and make false promises.

We have launched thousands of campaigns and demanded hundreds of things.

But the day after the COP we face a question. If we cannot make the leaders of the world act, what do we do?

We have to fight for one thing above all others: to stop burning fossil fuels. Not to reduce fossil fuels. Not some fantasy of net zero while we keep burning oil, gas and coal.

Many, many other measures are necessary. But to stop fossil fuels is far more important than all others. And we have to build mass movements from below all over the world to make that happen.

It is not enough to protest. One way or another, we have to take power.

PART TWO

JOBS NOT COPS

The world leaders at COP26 must focus immediately on a global reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases. This is now a matter of existential urgency. Our central task as a global community is to stop the burning of fossil fuels. And we can do that.

The reason this matters so much is that we have already put so much CO₂ into the air. As two recent IPCC reports have reminded us, humanity cannot put much more into the atmosphere without temperature increases of two or three or four degrees centigrade.

I discuss the consequences of such an increase in a later section. For the moment, the main message is, *don't go there*. That means we need all possible cuts in fossil fuel emissions.

The alternative is a concerted push to stop all burning of fossil fuels. For that to happen, we need massive programs to provide the jobs we need to replace all fossil fuel use with renewable energy.

We need to cut emissions of all greenhouse gases by at least 80 percent. Total global emissions in 2019 were the equivalent of 55 billion tons of 'CO₂ equivalent'. Let's take cuts in emissions from burning fossil fuels first.

Here are the global emissions of greenhouse gases each year, in billions of tons of 'CO₂ equivalent':

Burning Coal, Oil and Gas 37 billion tons a year

Everything Else 18 billion tons

TOTAL 55 billion tons

‘Everything else’ includes:

Agriculture 5 billion tons a year

Deforestation 5 billion tons

Industrial byproducts 3 billion tons) and

Waste 1.5 billion tons

F-gases 1.5 billion tons.

We can't cut absolutely all the emissions from burning fossil fuels. We can substitute rail journeys for most flights, but the remaining planes will still need some oil. And we probably cannot eliminate all oil for shipping across oceans. But still, we can cut emissions from burning fossil fuels from 37 billion tons to 2 billion tons.

We need to cut everything else too. Some sectors could be quick and straightforward. We can ban deforestation – all cutting down of old forests. And we can ban all use of F-gases in cooling and refrigeration – there are alternatives. Those two measures will reduce these emissions from 6.5 billion tons a year to zero.

In other sectors we can cut emissions by between a quarter and a half in twenty years. These include sewage systems, processing waste, rice cultivation, livestock, fertilizers and manure. Overall, my estimate is

that we can cut these emissions from 11.5 billion tons a year to 5 billion tons.

In other words, fossil fuels account for two-thirds of total emissions, 37 out of 55 billion tons.

A massive program of jobs can reduce emissions from fossil fuels by 35 billion tons. It can reduce other emissions by 12 billion tons. Reductions in burning fossil fuels will have three times the impact of everything else.

This makes fossil fuels the overwhelming priority. That means a concerted push to stop burning fossil fuels. For that to happen we need massive programmes to provide the jobs we need to replace all fossil fuel use with renewable energy.

Technology

To cut those emissions, four things will make almost all the difference.

First, stop burning coal, oil or gas to make electricity. Instead, cover the world with renewable energy.

Most of that will be wind power and solar PV. But we will need other sources to balance that energy, like wave and tidal power, geothermal and concentrated solar power. We will need several different ways to store electricity. And we will need large new supergrids to connect all the renewable energy and storage to supply all our current electricity needs.

Workers can get those jobs done in fifteen to twenty years, everywhere. We already have all the technology we need.

Second, we need to stop burning oil for transportation. To do that, we will have to change all cars, vans, trucks, buses and trains so they run on renewable electricity. And we need to replace most air flights with rail travel. Again, we have the technology. And for this we need to build more renewable energy to supply that electricity.

Third, we need new laws to insist that all new homes and buildings use far less energy for heating and cooling, and all of it is done by renewable electricity. And we need to insulate and convert all existing homes and buildings so they use far less energy and all heating comes from renewable electricity. Here too, we have to build more renewables.

Finally, we need to transform industry. One part of this is to stop making cement, because the process creates so much CO₂ as a byproduct.

But the main emissions in industry come from burning coal and gas to heat materials. We can replace all that with heating from renewable electricity. Again, we have almost all the technology we need to do that, and we can find the rest over the next 20 years.

Nobody is saying this will be easy. It is an immense task. We will need, globally, more than 100 million new jobs, each year for 20 years. It will not be cheap. But we can cut at least 35 out of 37 billion tons a year.

Only governments can raise and spend money on that scale.

Renewables

We cannot expect the market to do it. There are many theoretical arguments we could make about capitalism here. But we don't have to. Just look at the facts.

We have been waiting 30 years for the markets and capitalism to rewire the world. Emissions are still rising. That's long enough. Some that maybe private corporations could still do it, but they can't possibly do it in time.

And crucially, governments have to pass laws. We need new building regulations, and lanes and roads reserved for buses. We need to require electric engines in all new vehicles, now.

We will need governments to ban the production and sale of fossil fuels, except for a few tightly controlled uses. Some long haul airline flights, for instance, perhaps some shipping and backup generators for hospitals. Otherwise, we ban fossil fuels like we ban anthrax.

There is no reason to force renewables to out-compete fossil fuels, to be cheaper or easier. There is no reason to wait for that.

Building a fully renewable economy is the solution. But it's also where our troubles start. Because Thunberg is right. None of our governments have done what needs to be done. And fixing that is a daunting task, for reasons I will come to later.

The Limits of Natural Solutions

Planting new forests on a large scale will be important. But that process will take roughly another 5 billion tons a year out of the air for 20 years. But when that is done, it will be done. The effect will

balance about four years of global greenhouse gas emissions. That will buy time in the short term. And we need that time. But it will not be decisive in the long term.

You may find my estimates of the possible reduction in emissions through 'natural' means surprising. If beg you not to be outraged. I provide long discussions of these estimates in Fight the Fire. There are also many references to scientific articles you can explore.

Any Green New Deal, or national Climate Jobs service, or whatever you want to call it, will have to try to cut all these emissions too. Cutting fossil fuels alone will not be enough. But it will be by far the most important thing we can do.

The Net Zero Con

The idea of Net Zero emissions has become mainstream. Here's why it's a con.

Most Net Zero proposals rely on the idea that corporations or rich countries will pay for governments or companies in the Global South to cut fossil fuel emissions or plant trees. Then the rich countries or their corporations will be allowed to keep burning fossil fuels.

But 62% of the CO₂ emissions in the world now come from the Global South. We have to get as close as we can to Zero Fossil Fuel emissions South and North. We have to stop deforestation and plant new forests anyway, South and North. That would make Northern corporations paying offsets so they can continue to burn fossil fuels pointless. No one would be burning fossil fuels.

The other meaning of a Net Zero is that governments would promise to remove enormous amounts of CO₂ from the air at some future

unspecified date. This would be done using a technology that does not work to scale, without anything like enough space to store the CO₂.

This is instead of stopping fossil fuels now. Net Zero is a stall, a lie and an idea that leads to inaction.

PART THREE

BARRIERS TO A RENEWABLE WORLD?

I have argued that we will be lost without an almost 100% renewable global energy system. But some environmentalists now argue that a fully renewable world is impossible.

In my experience, these arguments come from three sorts of people.

First, there are the people who understandably despair at the possibility of forcing governments to rewire the world. So they are open to any arguments that provide an alternative.

Second, there is a strand of people in environmental politics who don't want a technical solution and insist that the main answer must be reduced consumption.

Third, there are the corporations, media and parties who want to defend inaction by arguing that action is impossible.

These arguments come in many different forms. I will take three examples here. There are many more in *Fight the Fire*.

Electric Vehicles

There is a growing global push towards electric vehicles. Norway, for example, has banned the sale of petrol and diesel cars from 2025. Biden has 'pledged' that half of cars in America will be electric by 2050. Many other countries are moving to do the same.

In *Fight the Fire* I argue that much more than is technically possible, and almost immediately. We could have all new cars, vans, buses, trucks and trains fully electric, and very quickly.

Some people then say, no, we have to concentrate on public transport instead. That is cleaner, more socialist, fairer and uses less energy. All these things are true. The only problem is that many of these people mean that we should have public transport instead of all electric vehicles.

The mistake here is one of arithmetic. First, globally about half of emissions from road travel come from cars. The rest are mostly from buses and trucks. In the richer countries, cars are the main problem. In the poorer countries, it's trucks and then buses.

But the deep problem is this. Let's say everyone switches from cars to buses and trains. Then global emissions from passenger transport fall by about half, if we are very lucky. Truck and van emissions do not change. Total road transport emissions may fall by 50 percent.

Trucks

Alternatively, let's say the balance of cars and buses remains the same as now. But all new cars, vans, trucks and buses have to run on electricity. That's perfectly possible, and governments can begin buying up old vehicles and retiring them.

Of course, we have to build enough renewable energy to produce electricity for all these vehicles, no mean feat. But the result is almost 100 percent cuts in road transport emissions.

I am not making an argument against public transport here. In *Fight the Fire* I spend a lot of time arguing what a much expanded system of public transport could look like.

I'm making a different point. I want more public transport. But I want 100 percent electrical vehicles now, and as much public transport as possible. Buses *and* electric cars and trucks, not buses *instead* of electric cars and trucks.

Lithium

Here is another example, again from cars. Most car batteries today contain lithium. Lithium mining in the global south is poisonous and destroys communities. And, many people say, there is not enough lithium in the world for anything like the number of vehicles we will need.

These things are all true. But then some people make a leap to say that we can't have electric vehicles because of the problems with lithium. And that's not true.

As I argue in *Fight the Fire*, there are other ways of producing lithium. We can mine sea water for lithium all over the world. It's just more expensive. There are many kinds of batteries that don't use lithium. Indeed, until 1995 none of the batteries in the world used lithium. The other kinds of batteries are just more expensive, that's all.

If we are limited by the market, and the companies who make the cars are run for profit, then we are stuck. But if governments can pass laws to control companies, then we are all right. And if Climate Jobs projects run by governments are building cars, then they can decide to spend more.

In this example, the arguments about poisoning the environment are not wrong. People are pointing to a real and pressing problem. The problem arises when this is made into an argument against transport run on renewable electricity. It becomes an argument about stopping fossil fuels.

Consumption

Many people now argue for reducing consumption to reduce emissions. They are right. That's why we need more public transport for that reason, and insulation of all buildings, and strict codes for all new buildings.

We need, as George Monbiot has argued eloquently, to reduce the consumption of the rich. We need to reduce the consumption of fertilizers and plastics and ban the manufacture of cement.

All that will make a difference. But as Monbiot has also argued, personal decisions to reduce some consumption make almost no difference. And there are several billion people in the world who do not consume enough.

But let's perform a thought experiment. Let's imagine that we can reduce total global consumption by 50 percent. I don't think that will happen, but let's imagine it.

Now imagine that we only rely on reducing consumption to reduce emissions. We have reduced emissions by 50 percent. But we know we are ruined if we cannot reduce fossil fuel emissions by 90 percent. So in this experiment, we are on the road to six degrees of temperature increase, but a bit more slowly.

The moral of this tale is that reducing consumption is not an alternative to replacing all fossil fuels with renewables. We have to both conserve energy where possible and ban fossil fuels. And any way you slice it, that will mean a massive increase in renewables.

Be Careful

These are only three examples. There are many more in *Fight the Fire*, and more detail. In each case, the objectors point to a real problem or a partial solution, or both. But the objection also feeds to a larger argument that we cannot stop fossil fuels, and so cannot stop climate change.

Here we need to be careful. The resistance of corporate leaders and politicians is shifting all the time. They used to say climate change was not proved.

Then came climate change is real, but we are doing something about it. Then we have not done anything yet, but we promise that we will.

There was climate action will destroy jobs. There was, depending on the country, blame the Chinese, or blame the Indians or the Americans or the Global North or the Global South. They won't do anything, so we can't.

Now they are saying we really ought to have a 100 percent renewable system, but tragically the environmentalists are saying that is not sustainable.

This is not the only area of life where the corporations and the right wing produce talking points that sound radical and appeal to people who want to change the world.

So we have to keep a clear distinction in mind. The problems that face renewables are real. But the answer is not to burn coal. The answer is to find a solution to the problem. In almost all cases, the alternative is there, but it is more expensive.

So in most cases, the solution that will work means moving beyond the rule of the market and the tyranny of profit. It means government action for human need, not corporate greed.

PART FOUR

THE ROAD TO HELL

Sometimes revolutionaries say to me that the important task is to persuade people that climate change, like all our troubles, is caused by capitalism, and cannot be stopped until we have a revolution. And I listen and think, you simply do not understand what is coming.

And sometimes environmentalists tell me that there is no point in just stopping climate change. It is just as important to defend water and all the other resources on Earth. And I think, you simply do not understand what is coming.

Sometimes trade unionists tell me that what really matters is jobs for working people. Sometimes vegetarians tell me that what really matters is food and diet. Other people tell me that only non-violent direct action will stop climate change. And I think, you simply do not understand.

I share those longings for revolution, for a green planet, for jobs and direct action and kindness to animals. My problem is when people say that something else is more important than stopping climate change.

When I hear them saying this, I also hear them saying that they do not want to stop climate change unless they get what they really want.

I can hear those sentiments clearly, because I was like that once. And I am often judgmental, because I judge myself.

I originally got into climate politics in 2004 because I was a freelance writer and a socialist, and I wanted to write to write a book to show

how Marxists could explain climate change better than environmentalists. God forgive me, for both the arrogance and the emotional distance.

But then I spent several months organising in the Campaign against Climate Change in Britain, learning from a brilliant environmentalist named Phil Thornhill. And I read the science like crazy. And after a certain point, I understood what climate change would mean. And with that I understood what Phil had been telling me: the point is to stop climate change. Period. That is what has to be done. I have been a climate activist ever since.

But I also understand that the people I am listening to are on the same sort of journey as me. They are grappling with how to marry the politics they bring to the struggle with the politics the reality of climate change requires.

So it's worth setting out here what I think runaway climate change will mean. I have done that at much greater length in *The Ecologist* before. But the key thing to grasp is that the future will not be like it is in Hollywood and dystopian science fiction.

Those models show small groups of cold and hungry people with a few old tools and weapons. They are wary of the other small groups of savages, and they move among the wreckage of an industrial civilisation.

It won't be like that at all.

The Physical Effects

Let's begin with the main physical effects of climate change. The first is that the rains will change. In some places there will be more crops. In most places, the rains will dry up.

When they do come, the rains will be at the wrong time of year for the crops. They will often fall in torrential downpours the soil cannot absorb. One result will be floods that wash away the soil, and another will be droughts that kill half or more of the crop.

In the long term, those droughts will grow worse and worse.

Those droughts will happen in the capitalist societies we all live in now. Those societies will turn natural disasters into social catastrophes. In this case, the droughts will push the price of bread or rice beyond what ordinary people can afford. Many small farmers and herders, and their children and old people, will die of hunger and disease.

We know all that from scientific models. But also because we have seen it in Sudan and Chad and Afghanistan since the 1960s, and in many other areas in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa.

There have been serious droughts too in richer countries, in Australia and the United States, with floods and fires. But only a small proportion of people in those countries make a living in agriculture. The wider society can, to some extent, carry the farmers.

Then there is simple heat, which is beginning to make life unlivable around the Persian Gulf, and in parts of Iran, Iraq and Arabia. In the coming decades, heat will drive humans out of much more of the world. And remember, almost a thousand people died in a heatwave in Chicago back in 1995. Chicago is far from the Persian Gulf. The

heatwaves to come there will kill many thousands and will come thick and fast.

Tropical storms too are growing in intensity. They are moving north in the Northern hemisphere and south in the Southern hemisphere. They produce hurricane surges, great waves like tsunamis that can reach ten meters high. These will combine with smaller rises in sea level to threaten the large proportion of the world's population lives along the shore, often in great cities.

Those cities, like Shanghai, New York, Mumbai, Durban, Kolkata, Rio, the Mekong Delta and many more, will become death traps without exits, full of poisoned water.

The droughts, the floods, the storms will create hundreds of millions of refugees. Those refugees will come up against borders and machine guns. Camps of tents will house a million hungry people here, more there, and hundreds of millions world wide. The walls will rise, as they are rising now on many borders.

On the safer side of the wall, racism will increase against the people who look or talk like the people on the other side of the wall. That racism will justify keeping the other people out.

Leaders and populists will blame the foreigners and call for war. And when the balance of geographic power changes, the great powers and the small powers, will go to war to restore the balance. This too we have begun, just begun, to see.

With Covid we have also seen how natural disasters become economic disasters. The physical effects of climate change will create enormous destruction of actual value, of things that are owned, homes and factories and refineries and transportation. Wall Street itself will literally go under water.

That destruction will ripple through the whole financial system. Those who keep their riches will try to hoard their wealth and not share it with the sick, the hungry and the homeless.

Feedbacks

These are the first order effects of climate change. The second order effects will kick in because of feedbacks in the our planet's climate system. Scientists know that the climate has often changed abruptly in the past, in years rather than thousands of years.

They know also that feedbacks produced those abrupt changes. They know feedbacks will be important again, because human action has been adding so much CO₂ to the air so quickly.

The level of CO₂ in the air is measured in parts per million. At the end of the ice ages, the amount of CO₂ in the air rose by 100 parts per million. In the last 65 years the CO₂ level has risen by another 100 parts per million.

However, the scientists do not know which feedback effects will be important, or when. We are in new territory here. We probably have at least twenty years. We may have thirty or forty years.

But when the feedbacks do kick in, then the disasters I have outlined will happen not one at a time, but all together, in the same year, in different parts of a country, in different countries and across the world. The economic stress, the stress of heat and fear and hunger, the deep rage of populations at the rich and the leaders will combine in a terrible pressure cooker.

At this point, somewhere in the process, there will be an unbearable general feeling that something must be done. And the ruling classes will move. The tanks will come onto the streets.

And the generals and race supremacists will come to us talking in the language that deep greens use now. But the words will have new meanings. They will tell us that humanity has failed, and our greed has brought disaster upon us all. We must now make sacrifices. And we will.

But the generals and the rich will not sacrifice. We will live in societies far poorer and far more unequal than before. And it will require great terror, many prisons, much torture and bombing to keep those inequalities in place.

The danger will not be other little bands of savages on the road. It will be police, the army and the full power of the state.

After the horrors of World War One, the German communist leader Rosa Luxemburg said that the world faced a choice between socialism or barbarism.

Luxemburg was a Jew, a Pole and a woman, and a lifetime enemy to colonialism and imperialism. But her choice or words was misleading. Barbarism is the word the old empires used for the colonised, and the savages beyond the empire. And that is not who we have to fear.

What we have to fear is civilisation. Look at the great killings of the last century – World War One, World War Two, the Holocaust, the Great Leap Forward famine in China, all the other famines and the Indochina War. These were the work of states, empires, armies and political parties.

We must fear not the collapse of civilisation, but the intensification of every inequality and cruelty we see now.

Look at that, and you also have to revise what we say about climate change. Yes, the people in poor countries, who are least responsible for the change, will suffer most. And everywhere in the world, the oppressed, the working people, the poor and minorities will suffer more than the rich.

All that is true, but even in the rich countries the police states that enforce poverty and inequality will restructure and degrade all human relationships. We have seen that before, in many places.

Cruelty begets callousness. I have seen enough of how trauma snakes down through the generations, blighting the lives of the children and grandchildren of the traumatised. And I know too how inflicting trauma is itself another form of trauma.

Cruel and unequal societies also produce cruel and unequal relationships of gender and sexuality. Where there is torture, rape also flourishes. In men like Trump, Putin, Modi and Duterte we get some hints of the sort of rulers we will face, and the sort of societies they will create.

But it will not be the end of humanity. We are the dominant species. There is no reason to believe that we will all perish, though many other forms of life will.

We must not exaggerate. For if we do, we create a fantasy apocalypse which is hard to believe. Several hundred million will die, a far worse loss than in the twentieth century. Perhaps even a billion.

But the greater damage will be to the survivors, to what they must see and do and enable to survive. The greater damage is what we could become.

It is not hard to imagine that world, is it? Because we can hear the rustle and whispers of that future already, gathering all around us.

However, there will not be one moment of runaway feedback, after which all is lost. Increasing emissions will produce a cascade of feedbacks. Moreover, if and when we do enter the gates of hell, that will not be the end of history. Cruelty and greed will try to rule.

But love, caring and solidarity will not disappear from the human heart. The struggle between the two sides will blaze everywhere. One of the reasons we fight to stop climate change now is so that, if we have to, we can fight for another better world then.

PART FIVE

WHY WON'T THE WORLD LEADERS ACT?

Why won't the leaders of the world act to prevent the terrible suffering resulting from climate breakdown? To answer that question, we need to understand the powers we are up against.

On the face of it, something very odd is happening. The scientists have made it clear what will happen. And yet Greta Thunberg is right: all the leaders of the world have done nothing. Just blah blah blah. Not just most of the leaders. All of them. How do we understand this unanimity?

We face three problems. The first is the power of the oil and gas companies, the coal companies, the power companies and the banks who have loan them money. The people who own and run these corporations understand that real climate solutions will mean the death of their corporations.

People often say that Shell or BP could just move into renewable energy. Indeed, both those companies put out lying ads saying they are doing just that.

But that's not how technical change works in capitalism. When cars replaced trains in the US, the railway companies ceased to dominate, and Ford and General Motors replaced them. When personal computers replaced mainframes, Microsoft and Apple replaced IBM.

So the present day carbon corporations have been fighting dirty. Until recently, they concentrated on encouraging climate denial. As that gets harder, they have moved on to hidden, but still virulent, attempts to defend fossil fuels.

George Bush, Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro, Trudeau and all of OPEC have been the political representatives of these corporations. That is a formidable combination of corporate and political power.

But fossil capital is not the worst problem we face. They are a minority of capitalists and a minority of members of the global ruling classes. The majority of capitalists speak for other industries, and they are torn.

On the one hand, they usually have children and grandchildren. Some of them are monsters, but some are not. They read and listen to the same science as the rest of us. They know what is at stake. And they own the world. Why should they want to destroy it?

This contradiction is why so many world leaders keep saying that something must be done about climate change. Sure, some of them are hypocrites. But many are genuine. They want to do something. Their problem, though, is the something which must be done.

Any one who has thought about the matter deeply, from whatever political position, knows that stopping climate change will require massive government programs. Government spending, yes, but also governments directly hiring people on a massive scale.

Those Green New Deals would mean the end of neoliberalism and austerity. As soon as we start down that road, people will say, if we can do that for the air, why not for the hospitals? Why not for decent housing? For the schools. For my pension. The precedent will be of such a scale that it will open the floodgates.

For forty years now there has been an endless barrage of neoliberal ideas from the top of society.

‘Only the market can solve great social problems.’ ‘Everyone must do what the market says.’ ‘You can’t fight the corporations.’ ‘Collective

resistance cannot change the world.’ And the clincher: ‘Most people are selfish, greedy and cowardly.’

These ideas are not just in the heads of people at the top, professors at elite universities and media editors. Those ideas are in the heads of billions, all over the world.

People like you and me have these ideas in our heads too, however strong our commitment to resistance. Those are the ideas that make us despair of the fate of the world in bed in the dark.

For the corporate leaders and the politicians to blow away that belief in our hearts is to put every aspect of their control in danger. They know they cannot allow it.

So they shout that something must be done. And then they cannot bring themselves to do what they know must be done. And then Thunberg shames them, because they are ashamed.

The contradiction is real. And it is in the space provided by that contradiction that we are able to organise for climate action. Because they know that something must be done, they fund the scientists who then struggle to tell the truth in public. Because they know something must be done, endless TV programs say something must be done.

Competition

But we also face a third problem, in some ways the most intractable one. Competition is the heart blood of capitalism, and all the world is now capitalist. Corporations compete, managers compete, banks compete, brokers compete, students compete, shopkeepers compete, nations and national economies compete.

The competition is economic, because in capitalism the company which makes the most profit re-invests, grows and prospers. The company that falls a little behind invests less, falls further behind, and spirals down. And this comes to seem normal, because it infects every aspect of the lives of the rich, and many aspects of the hearts and souls of the rest of us.

Capitalist competition creates problems for climate action. On one level, we need new steel plants using renewable electricity. That means a steel corporation has to build a very expensive new plant. And they have to pay far more for electricity than they did for coal. How can they compete with the steel company in Romania or Pennsylvania that does not pay that price.

There is an answer. It's some combination of government loans, nationalisation, tariffs and electricity subsidies. Every bit of that answer involves government action. And the deeper problem lies at the level of competition between nations and national economies.

Each of the great powers watches their competitive position against the others. The leaders of each country, and their economic leaders, fear falling behind in global competition. And the leaders of the lesser powers, and of the countries with almost no global power, fear helpless ruin.

Yet we have to move beyond this competition. In the end, the problem can only be solved at the international level. But this is COP26 – twenty-six empty years. So many have tried for so long. The leaders of the world have not solved the problem and will not. The UN process has not and will not. The market has not and will not.

Solidarity

That means we have to win climate action country by country. And then we have to come back together and solve the problem at the international level together.

Global solidarity is not an optional extra here. Nor is it a moral duty. Solidarity is the precondition of survival. The people of Nigeria and the United States, of China and India, of Brazil and South Africa, will have to organise and act for the people of the world.

No lesser commitment will break through the force of competition. Only solidarity, lived and absorbed into our beings, can meet greed head on.

This cannot simply be the people of the rich countries helping the poor of the Global South. It will be that. But it will have to be, even more, the people of the South acting and fighting for all the people of the world.

What we must do brings us up against something big. Call it government, or the state, or politicians. We can only stop climate change through government action.

Social movements are good at resistance. They can make demands. They can strike, occupy, and sometimes stop a great evil.

But to stop climate change governments will have to take not just one-off actions. If we demand governments do what they do not want to do, they will wriggle, postpone, sabotage, and kill policies in committee. For better or worse, we will need not just to change governments, but to become governments.

Of course, we can stand at a distance from the government that carries through the policies the movement has fought for. But we now

have a lot of evidence of what happens when social movements let a politician and a party carry through their policy. In practice, the movement tie themselves to that politician or that party, without any way of controlling it or her.

So don't let anybody kid you. We, the movement, will have to become the government. And more than likely kick out the first government, and replace them, and maybe replace the replacements.

This is a horrifying prospect for most social movement activists for good reasons. There is the memory of how power corrupts, how the dream of Communism became the reality of inequality, dictatorship and sleaze.

We have seen what the movements against colonialism became in office in India, South Africa, Algeria, Egypt and so many other places. We have seen what happened to the Democrats in the US, and to the Labour Party in Britain, the Social Democrats in Germany and Socialist Parties in many places.

The more recent experience of Syriza in Greece, the Sandanistas in Nicaragua, or Podemos in Spain only repeats the story. All three came from the movements, and all adapted to power.

We have been taught the same lesson over and over. If you take over the management of a piece of the global economic system, you become the management of a piece of the global economic system.

No wonder there is a strong streak of anarchism in the climate movement. But there is another hard contradiction here. Like it or not, we have to take over power, in form or another.

And there is another reason the movement hesitates at politics and parties. Greta Thunberg is a deep political thinker. When she was

asked about the Green New Deal in 2019, she said that supporting it would split the movement.

Thunberg said that quietly because she did not want to pick a fight. But she did say it, because it was true.

Committing ourselves to a Green New Deal alone, just to a government programme of climate jobs, will all by itself split the movement. Committing to different political parties to support climate action will split it even further.

This is a high price to pay. But somehow we have to try to unite a movement of different political projects, all pointing in something like the same direction.

Revolution

Then there are the NGOs. Most of them have some kind of charitable remit that forbids politics. Most try to influence existing governments. Most take at least some of their funding from governments, the EU or the UN. It is part of their DNA not to be political. Some NGOs may be able to remake themselves, to go beyond their history. But for many this will be too hard.

Let me be clear what I am not saying here. I am not saying that what we need is one new revolutionary party. Much less a revolutionary party based on the leadership of one of the existing revolutionary parties.

Nor am I insisting that the change will have to be revolution, or that there will have to be an insurrection. However, I am pretty sure that if we do manage to save the planet, afterwards everyone will refer to it as the Climate Revolution.

I am not offering a prescription here for how to take power. Some will want to change the leadership and policies of different existing parties. Some will want new parties. Some will want to change the whole political system. We will see what works.

My main point here is that, one way or another, mass climate movements will have to take power. But we will also have to remain organised outside the government, because we will need a mass movement to force the new people in power to do what they promised to do.

Nor am I saying we should concentrate all our energy on politics and the state. Far from it. A movement that pursues only one strategy will wither. People bring many different strengths and passions to the movement.

Anyone who tells you there is only set of tactics will work is trying to sell you something. We will need elections, strikes, occupations, blockades, civil disobedience, petitions, prayer vigils, marches, workshops, meetings, websites, food reform, silent witness and rap concerts in stadiums.

I am not saying subordinate everything else to trying to win Green New Deals in government. I am saying that we have to do each and all of these things *and* keep our eyes on the prize at the same time.

PART SIX

LOVE AGAINST DEATH

For two centuries the great movements for equality and human liberation have been powerful in Europe and North America. But they have been strongest in the former colonial world, in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Moreover, those movements North and South have been strongest among working people, small farmers, the colonised, the enslaved and the oppressed. We cannot stop climate change unless our mass movements are supported and led by those same people, South and North.

As I finish rewriting this article, I also flip back and forth between the videos from the start of the COP in Glasgow and the million person march in all the towns of Sudan against the military coup.

The Glasgow videos are exciting, and full of young energy. But the scenes from Sudan show a people in motion. In one video the talking heads are a working class man in his 20s and a working class women in her 20s. Behind them, the men of the neighbourhood pass mud bricks in a line, steadily building a barricade across the road.

It is not a barricade like the ones in *Les Miserables*, the kind you fight behind. It is a barricade that stops traffic, and they are building them everywhere in Khartoum and Omdurman. They are a tool in the general strike that has closed down the twin cities of the capital, and much of the rest of the country. Other videos and photos show women urging on their communities as they march toward the guns.

These people have been fighting for a long time. They fought for independence from the British. A general strike and an insurrection in the streets overthrew an early military dictatorship in 1985. In 2019 an uprising across the country forced another dictatorship to share power with civilians. That is the agreement the army has gone back on now.

The Sudanese have lived for a long time in one of the crucibles of climate change. In the West of the country, in Kordofan and Darfur, ever since 1969 climate change has led to drought, hunger, famine, violence and war. Khartoum and Omdurman are full of refugees from drought and war. Nyala, in Darfur, is one of the strongholds of the march today, mentioned in the same breath as the twin cities.

Many have commented that the COP in Glasgow is the whitest and most affluent ever. True enough. That's partly due to Covid, and partly to increasing cynicism and rage about the COP.

But the future we need is a fusion of the message of Fridays For Future and the courage and depth of the Sudanese revolution.

The movement in Sudan is part of uprisings that happen in many countries. It began with the Arab Spring in 2011. Then, since 2019, there have been similar mass movements and uprisings.

In dictatorships people have fought for free elections, in Algeria, Myanmar, Thailand, Byelorussia and Hong Kong. In countries with formal democracy they have fought for deeper democracy, real people power, in Chile, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran.

The great Black Lives Matter protests in the United States are part of the same feeling. So are Fridays For Future. They are movements of the young, against all established power, for bread and freedom and equality.

Working people

These movements are growing in the world. They are powered by millions of people looking for a new way to solve an old problem. Humanity lives now in the ruins of three great historical movements – socialism, communism and colonial independence.

Dreams of equality powered those great movements, and they power the great uprisings. People are casting around, though, asking themselves what went wrong before, what is wrong now. And one of the answers you can see millions finding everywhere is not enough democracy.

Any democracy is better than none, and people are prepared to die for that, and to defy the cruelty of the police and army. But an even wider feeling is the same one that faces the climate movement. All over the world, whether we can vote or not, somehow we cannot control the levers of power. Corporations and politicians control our lives.

There is a longing, but also a deep need, for an explosion of democracy, for a world turned upside down, where the values and votes of working people in cities and villages actually determine what happens in our lives and on our planet.

We

In climate meetings in Europe and North America I keep hearing people say ‘We’.

‘We consume too much,’ they say.

‘We must understand our privilege.’

‘How do we make them understand?’

‘We can make do with far less.’

‘We have to reduce our emissions.’

‘We have to change America.’

I am always polite. But more and more I want to scream. This is the we of the privileged, of the educated, the affluent, the rich, and often the white.

But in every meeting, on every call, there are people from among the billions who are not privileged, not comfortable, not unhurt. The people say ‘we’ mostly want to be inclusive. But everything they say about ‘us’ shows who they exclude, almost without thinking.

That pronoun will not serve for the crisis we now enter. I use we to mean, at different times, the oppressed, the hurt, the damaged, the working people and the small farmers, those who yearn for hope, and all the global movements of resistance. My we is the frightened and terrified who know they must be brave for those they love. My deepest we is our species, all humanity.

Those are the wes needed now. Looming before us is the threat of climate change. Sometimes now that threat blows and howls around us. Sometimes the threat burns into flames all around us. More often, the smoke of the threat darkens the sky. Sometimes it takes food from our children in Syria, Sudan, Mali, Pakistan or Afghanistan.

That threat confronts all humanity. The reason is simple physics. It takes eighteen months for the greenhouse gases put into the air in one place to mix completely with the gases from everywhere else.

The amount of CO₂ in the world has been measured every day since 1954 at an observatory on the top of a mountain in Hawaii. There has

never been a need for a second observatory. The numbers would be almost the same on top of any mountain in the world.

We confront what is to come as a species. But also we have to solve it as a species. If we do not solve it all over the world, we cannot solve it anywhere. But if we do not begin somewhere, we cannot solve it anywhere.

If we fight in isolation, only self by self, group by group, country by country, we will be lost. Struggle cannot live without solidarity. The only vision that can give us the enormous strength we will need is to know that we are fighting for our fellow humans, with our fellow humans, across the world.

Maybe this is an aspiration now. But our struggle will not win until we make that aspiration a reality. And if we win, that will make the hope reality.

We fight also for all the other carbon-based life forms, who have not made this crisis, but whose only hope rests on the shoulders of humanity.

I know what people mean when they that we should listen to indigenous voices. But indigenous people are also part of us. The Muslim women and men dying now of a climate famine in the high valleys of Afghanistan are us. The refugees on the move, in the dark, in the trucks, climbing the passes, holding each other in the tossing boats on great seas, they are us.

The poor farmers and herders who have killed each other for grass and water in Darfur. The Chinese workers in Foxconn's great computer factories, tormenting their bodies because they need a job. The old men in West Virginia who lost the mining the jobs that were so hard and they were so proud of, they are us.

We are everywhere, and we are the hope of the world. Because climate change will not halt until we come together.

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