

# Climate Change

## *WE HAVE TO ACT NOW!*

*The major capitalist countries (G8) are planning to meet in June in Germany to discuss climate change, among other issues. The Socialist Party and its sister organizations in the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) will be involved in helping to build the campaign against global warming and will be participating in the anti-G8 demonstrations.*

*Dave Nellist answers some questions about the causes of climate change and puts forward a socialist solution.*

The climate is changing because the average surface temperature of the earth has risen by 0.74°C since the 1850s. The climate change of the past 150 years has been caused by the increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. These greenhouse gases act like a blanket on the planet and are rising to dangerous levels.

The most critical greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide - concentrations in the air have risen by 30% since the start of the Industrial Revolution and are now present in the atmosphere in higher amounts than at any time for the past 650,000



years. The burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) and the changing use of land have produced most of that extra carbon dioxide.

Eleven of the warmest years since records began 150 years ago have occurred in the last 12 years. The rise in average global temperatures over the last 50 years is now reckoned to be twice the rate of the previous 100 years.

### **Why is it a problem?**

If rising average temperatures only meant flowers blooming with the arrival of an earlier

spring, or French champagne houses planning to plant vineyards in southern England, few would be worried.

But the effects that are already being seen are more dramatic. Arctic ice is thinning (by 40% since the 1960s) and shrinking (by 9% per decade). The number of Category 4 and 5 storms has almost doubled in the last 30 years; droughts in the Sahel during the 1970s and 80s, and current droughts in the Amazon and Australia, are suspected to be a result of rising ocean temperatures. Poverty and food insecurity have also been linked to climate variability. And those changes are due to an average rise in global temperature of less than 1°C.

The latest report from the United Nations climate science panel (IPCC) predicts that there could be temperature rises as high as 6.4°C before the end of the century. The rise in sea levels, which melting ice and expanding oceans would produce, could displace hundreds of millions of people presently living near coasts in Asia, as well as other low-lying countries such as Holland or river deltas such as the Nile in Egypt.

Some islands in the Pacific Ocean would disappear completely. Widespread changes in rain and wind patterns could produce expanding deserts in Spain, Italy and Greece; making life impossible for tens of millions of people who could seek to move northwards (to Britain and Scandinavia) to live.

## How can you be so certain?

Over the last ten years, a small minority of scientists has challenged the majority view put forward by the IPCC. Over that period the IPCC considers that climate change was "likely" (over 66% chance) to have been caused by human activity - though its latest report issued at the

beginning of February changed that to "very likely" (over 90% chance).

Maverick sceptics, from novelist Michael Crichton to journalists such as the Daily Mail's Melanie Phillips, have now been marginalised. Yet still, as the guardian revealed at the beginning of February, a think tank funded by oil giant Exxon Mobil offered scientists and economists \$10,000 each to write articles to rubbish the IPCC report.

The report was the product of the work of thousands of scientists and had to be unanimously approved by 154 governments. By its very nature that makes the report conservative and potentially underestimating the

risks of rapid global climate change. What is still not fully understood, for example, is the potential for positive feedback to occur which could accelerate climate changes.

For example the reduction of Arctic ice, which reflects a lot of sunlight, and its replacement with warmer, dark ocean water, could see a greater absorption of heat by the Arctic

Ocean and in turn a further speed up of global warming. Faster temperature rises in the northern latitudes could release billions of tonnes of methane from rotting vegetation presently trapped in the frozen tundra. Methane is 23 times more dangerous a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

## Are governments now taking climate change seriously?

Whilst any steps forward in fighting climate change would be welcome, weak international treaties so far have had virtually no effect. The UN called a climate change conference in 1992, which led to the Kyoto agreement in 1997. That



agreement eventually came into effect in February 2005!

It aimed for all developed nations to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by between 3% and 8% of their 1990 levels by 2012. Few countries have achieved that target and the US, which produces about a quarter of the world's carbon dioxide pollution, refused to ratify the agreement. Australia also refused. Major emerging economies, such as China and India were never involved.

Big companies with vested interests have fought campaigns to protect current shareholders' profits, rather than invest to prevent a catastrophe 20 or 30 years away. Carmakers in Europe have this month forced a watering down of the emissions targets.

The debate on whether human activity has caused global warming may be more settled but those mainly responsible for greenhouse gases (the owners of energy and transport industries) are still seeking to avoid anything that hurts their profits.

Most climate change scientists have argued that the cuts required in greenhouse gas emissions in order to prevent major climatic change need to be of the order of 60% to 80%, ten times the previous Kyoto targets. NASA's top climate scientist, Jim Hansen, believes those cuts need to take place over the next ten years or the rate of climate change could reach a tipping point and accelerate even faster.

## What has socialism got to do with it?

Socialists believe that the only way which changes of that magnitude can be brought about is if energy production and transport industries are rationally planned, taking into account people's needs and the necessity of a sustainable environment.



Private ownership and the drive for profit under capitalism make it impossible to make changes at the speed and on the scale required. Public ownership and democratic planning are urgently required. Appeals to the capitalists' better nature, even when backed up with laws and regulations, will never work.

## Where would the money come from?

The current estimate for the introduction and running costs of a Trident nuclear missile replacement [in the UK] is £76 billion. That money could be spent on promoting a massive shift to public transport, insulation and heat efficiencies for existing and new houses, and an urgent move towards renewable energy production and use.

A socialist economy could transfer energy production to renewable sources, such as wind, wave, tidal, solar and geothermal, over a relatively short period, without spending billions of pounds on the replacement of potentially dangerous nuclear power stations.

Internationally the money exists, and more resources could be generated to transform the future of the planet. But wealth is currently spent carving up the globe for the interests of major capitalist countries and their multinationals. World military expenditure is currently over £500 billion a year. The problem is not financial; it is about who controls the world's resources.

Neither is the problem technical. Mitigation - that is the transfer to renewable energy production and a rapid change in transport and housing provision - to reduce the emission of harmful greenhouse gases and adaptation (for example better sea defences) are not rocket science.

The solution to damaging climate change is political. As long as the global economy remains in the hands of the multi-national corporations, where priorities are measured in terms of profits, then capitalist solutions to global warming are likely to be too little and too late.

Socialists, trade unionists, environmentalists and young people need to bring together large enough forces to build a new workers' party that can begin to challenge the capitalist economic system which is leading us to catastrophe.

*Want to find out more or help with the Socialist Party's campaigning?*

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But the problem, and the solution, is not confined to any one country. China is currently opening a new coal-fired power station every seven days. The fight against climate change has to be international, linking socialist and workers' organisations worldwide to promote and develop international socialist planning of the planet's resources, under the ownership and democratic control of the working class.

# How Can The Planet Be Saved?

**Public Meeting**  
  
**Climate Change**

## **Planet Not Profit:**

- ☞ No to Nuclear - for mass investment in renewable energy!**
- ☞ Decent public transport as an alternative to driving!**
- ☞ No to destruction of the environment by business for profit!**

*DISPLAY: Socialist Party & Socialist Youth regularly campaign on environmental*